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ABSTRACT

This book is designed as a basic guide to the development of effective school public relations programs. The author provides guidelines for setting up effective communication strategies and presents ideas for spreading good news as well as for dealing with problems. One chapter focuses specifically on the difficult communication problems presented by school violence and vandalism, declining enrollments, school district mergers, test scores, strikes, desegregation, student discipline, and school finance elections. The author discusses in turn each of the key steps in developing an effective PR program--from analyzing communication needs and problems, to planning and implementing activities and programs to meet those needs, to evaluating the results. Throughout the book, numerous brief case studies describe actual communication strategies employed by school districts around the country. (JG)

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# Building Public Confidence For YOUR Schools

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

## A Source Book of Proven PR Practices

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# Acknowledgement

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) was founded more than 40 years ago for the purpose of improving school-community relations through better communication. Since that time the association has worked to meet the goal of "advancing the cause of education through responsible public relations, information and communication" through a wide variety of publications, newsletters, audiovisual materials, workshops, conferences and seminars.

*Building Public Confidence in YOUR Schools* is designed as a basic guide to the development of effective school public relations programs in every school district in the country. The association expresses its thanks particularly to Dr. Edward L. Bernays, the founding father of public relations in the United States and author of *Crystalizing Public Opinion*, for his encouragement in this effort and his suggestions for content.

And thank you to all our members and school administrators across the country who have answered questionnaires, submitted board policies, program and job descriptions, participated in the mini-workshops held for the past six years at major education association conventions, sent in materials on critical issues in school communication areas, and shared their ideas on programs that work.

*Building Public Confidence in YOUR Schools* was written by J. William Jones, director of information services for the school District of Philadelphia and author of several EDUCATION U.S.A. Special Reports and NSPRA communication handbooks. It was developed and edited by Cynthia C. Menand and Virginia M. Ross of the NSPRA staff. John H. Wherry was editorial director. Special technical and editorial assistance was provided by Virginia McAllister, Anne C. Lewis, Lyn Broad, Janet Eaffy, Debbie Lucckese. The cover design and graphics are by Brooke Todd and Associates of Arlington, Va.

# Preface

Public education of the children who will become the men and women who make up our democratic society is possibly society's most important function. For only if that education meets the needs of that society can these people make the decisions on which its future rests.

Public education carried out by the society functions effectively only if there is proper adjustment between the people and the public education system. It must meet present and future needs, desires and hopes of the society. The public must understand the why and wherefore of the principles and practices of public education.

To bring about this necessary adjustment, society cannot depend only on administrative and teaching personnel. In this complex world, the activity requires a trained sociatal professional, who can apply current knowledge of the social sciences—especially of public opinion—to coping with the problem.

Public relations specialists, whose profession has developed over the last half century, bring to solving this problem of adjustment, academic training in the social sciences. They now have at their command a literature of some 15,000 items. The National School Public Relations Association serves this public interest purpose.

Public relations is not, as some believe, a one-way street of dissemination of facts and opinions about public education. It functions as a two-way street, interpreting the public to the school system as a basis for its actions, as well as interpreting the public education system to the public.

This book ably presents this modern-day public relations viewpoint. It implements it with data and case studies that should enable the practitioner to carry out more effectively the mandate the profession fulfills.

It should help bring about that adjustment between public and public education, so vital to our society's future.

**Edward L. Bernays**

Chapter 1.

# Overview

There isn't much question anymore about the status or image of public education in this country. It needs help. From the problem-plagued urban center, to the tree-lined and once trouble-free streets of suburbia, to the hills and the valleys of rural America—education, particularly public education, is in serious trouble. It's certainly in financial trouble as the nation's tax-burdened populace rebels against education's escalating costs. And it's in trouble politically as legislators elected by the populace read the rebellion clearly and quickly join its ranks.

Fred M. Hechinger, former education editor of *The New York Times*, puts the picture bluntly into perspective when he writes that "America is in headlong retreat from its commitment to education."

Writing for *Saturday Review*, Hechinger says:

> Political confusion and economic uncertainty have shaken the people's faith in education as the key to financial and social success. This retreat ought to be the most pertinent issue in any examination of the country's condition . . . At stake is nothing less than the survival of American democracy.

The result of abandoning public education as the escalator of upward mobility for the children of both poverty and the middle class, Hechinger warns, "will be a stratified, classbound society ruled by a self-perpetuating power elite of economic and social privilege," marking "the end of the road that was opened by Thomas Jefferson when he called for a new aristocracy of talent to replace the old aristocracy of inherited power."

Hechinger stresses that "the threat of such a course is all the more serious because it is virtually universally ignored" outside of education circles. "None of those who are monitoring the nation's problems," he says, "are paying attention to the far-reaching implications of the retreat from education. Few are aware that such a retreat is actually in progress."

In short, much of America has lost its confidence in public education.

Perhaps the dramatic decline began one day in October 1957 with the shocking news that Russia had beaten the United States into space.

While the Russian satellite Sputnik circled the earth in outer space, people in high places began to ask why? Why had a nation supposedly inferior to the United States embarrassed us with the technology and the knowhow to beat us into space?

One accusing finger was pointed directly at the system of education in the United States. Was it really all that it was supposed to be? Was it, indeed, the best education system in the world, as it so proudly proclaimed? Was it really producing the kind of leaders of tomorrow who would maintain the country's "rightful" place atop the list of world powers?

From that point on, public education in this country was no longer a closed society, answerable only to itself. The classroom no longer was sacrosanct, insulated from the scrutiny of the outside world, opened briefly for American Education Week and then quickly closed again from prying eyes.

Education watchdog groups were formed, particularly in the urban sector, to probe more deeply into public education. Naturally standardized achievement tests were developed and proliferated. The public began to ask questions and demand answers. And some of the answers weren't good.

Most inner-city schools were a mess. Facilities and achievement were abominable. Discrimination was uncovered. Desegregation battles flared up—not only in the courts, but also in the streets.

Reformers began to change the traditional facade of education—to introduce innovation and open education and schools without walls; to contend that if a child was not learning properly it was not the child's fault but the fault of the instructional system.

The federal government stepped in, passing the historic Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and channeling billions of dollars into an effort to upgrade the education of the poor.

And teachers began unionizing. Suddenly, the quiet little school marm, who traditionally had taught for a pittance, put down her chalk, picked up a picket sign and demanded better wages and working conditions.

School finance became a major issue. State and federal courts declared state funding formulas unfair to poorer school districts. Property taxes escalated by leaps and bounds; state taxes rose rapidly.

Then changing lifestyles and improved birth control techniques brought an abrupt end to the baby boom. And although school enrollments began to decline, the cost of education continued to escalate. Senior citizens on fixed incomes joined the fray.

And not only did enrollments decline. So did Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores.

Again, the public asked, "What's happening? What's wrong with education? What are they doing with all my tax dollars?"

Suddenly, education was in the spotlight. It was front page news in the morning and one of the lead TV stories at night.

This concern about the schools stems from a growing awareness that education is indispensable if society and its individual members are to survive in a fiercely competitive world. With life and progress virtually dependent upon learning, the public's appetite for information about schools is becoming almost insatiable.

Accustomed to progress and efficiency in other fields, people want to know how well their schools are keeping abreast of the times. This interest is fed by an anxiety that education, despite all efforts, may be falling behind.

Sheer magnitude constitutes a factor today in both the hunger for information about schools and the difficulty of satisfying that hunger. The extension of educational benefits to increasing ranges of students has multiplied the number of people who feel identified with school services. At the same time, the growth of large and complex educational organizations has produced a type of centralized management that tends to reduce the flow of information to the people and inhibit the democratic involvement of citizens in considering critical public matters.

Educators and boards of education were forced into the need to communicate; to communicate with the public, the press, radio and TV; to communicate with their own employes; to communicate the fact that despite the turmoil spawned by the sudden clouds of discontent, there is still a vast amount of good in public education in this country.

Consider the following positive statistics from *the Condition of Education, 1977*, compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics:

✓ **Median School Years Completed** (persons aged 25):

1910— 8.1
1950— 9.3
1975—12.3 (and rising)

✔ **Percentage of 5-17 year-olds enrolled**
1900—72%
1975—89%

✔ **Percentage of 5-17 year-olds attending regularly**
1900—69%
1975—92%

✔ **Percentage of high school graduates among 17-year-olds**
1900— 6%
1975—74%

And these are not just numbers. The students they represent are receiving, for the most part, a comprehensive education for survival in today's highly complex and changing world. They become a vital part of a productive and forward-looking work force and part of a public that is increasingly aware of the economic, technological, social and global forces that have impact on their lives.

But how will the public know if we don't tell them?

Sadly, not only the ability, but also the commitment to communicate is all too often lacking.

Many educational administrators are immobilized. Trained to think of education as a professional operation, they search for ways to reduce public curiosity. Some characterize all efforts to inform the public as "Madison Avenue high pressure tactics." Their tendency is to argue that the best public relations officers are the children, content to the extent they report nothing negative about the schools. Other administrators are so sensitive to the dangers of misinterpretation that they subconsciously adopt the doctrine of "no news is good news."

The educational administrator's responsibility for handling public information is unavoidable. Experience indicates that maintaining good relations with the public is one of the most delicate and difficult problems confronted by superintendents of schools. A state commissioner of education has observed that, in taking over a superintendency, the administrator faces two immediate tasks: giving a speech and solving some thorny public information problems. And the administrator is not trained for either task.

More leadership failures are reputed to be caused by poor public relations, by breaches of understanding between schools and their publics, than by any other single factor. Yet many practicing administrators report that they received little preparation in this area. Some suggest that the training they did obtain was ineffective.

A consequence of leadership failure is that educational programs are undermined.

The restoration of public confidence in education is a complex problem. It involves a fine tuning of the education system to meet both the needs of individual students as well as the needs of a progressive and humane society. It is a problem where the answers lie not only in improved instructional programs, but in a renewed commitment by both the suppliers and the buyers of the product. To succeed, it must involve the dedication of the professional, the parents, the community and the students in time, dollars, and, most important, ideas. It involves the development and refinement of superior communication skills by *all* interested parties. And that's what this book is all about.

It is more practical than theoretical. It involves guidelines and keys to setting up communication abilities which will ensure the education community of an open and honest exchange of information both internally and externally. It provides ideas for spreading good news about education as well as a forum for resolving differences. Education cannot succeed in a vacuum. The ideas presented in the next 200+ pages can serve as a start or refresher course to the key features of an effective communication program—from analyzing needs and problems, to planning and implementing programs and activities to meet the needs, to evaluating the results.

Understanding the problems facing public education and the efforts being made to solve these problems, recognition of the successes of public education and involvement in the process are the cornerstones of increased public confidence and, most important, increased support of a commitment to education.

## Chapter 2

# Public Relations

What is education community to do about the fix in which it finds itself? How *can* public confidence be restored?

Again, Hechinger has some blunt answers:

> Without projecting a compelling, forward-looking agenda, education's leaders cannot hope to arouse the American people from the self-centered preoccupation with their own economic troubles. The public will not help to rescue the schools and colleges unless these institutions spell out once again what they can do for the American people.

Hechinger calls for a "coast-to-coast campaign" for halting the retreat and then for moving forward again.

"No other objective," he says, "seems more urgent than helping the American people regain their faith in education. The incentive to do so is elemental: to prevent the decline and fall of the American democracy."

## Time To Go on the Offensive

In other words, it's time that educators and boards of education stopped being embarrassed about mounting an effective public relations campaign and went on the offensive to tell their story clearly and compellingly to the public, the press, the politicians and anyone else who will be responsible for helping improve the image of education in the months and years ahead.

## An Act of Social Responsibility

Edward L. Bernays, author of the 1923 book *Crystalizing Public Opinion*, counselor to Presidents, corporations and government agencies for the past 60 years, and generally regarded as the father of public relations in the United States, calls the task of salvaging education through better public relations "possibly the most important in the country, because the future of the country depends on it."

Bernays contends that school systems must not be frightened off by the "semantic tyranny" of those who would oppose the concept of public relations in education, because true public relations is an act of "social responsibility."

"In America," he says, "words are as fragile as lace or a soap bubble. The words and their meanings get kicked around . . . so today the words 'public relations' are so muddy in meaning that to some they do mean press agentry or flackery."

Actually, Bernays contends, public relations is the act of "counseling clients on behavior patterns and attitude patterns in order to more effectively meet their goals with the public upon whom they are dependent."

The most important element of good public relations, he says, is the question, "how shall I behave in action and in attitudes to achieve my social objectives?"

School district news releases won't come close to achieving that kind of social responsibility, Bernays continues, but a good, comprehensive public relations program based upon carefully drawn goals and objectives will.

School districts, Bernays says, must "intensify existing favorable attitudes toward education, convert those who are on the fence, and negate attitudes that are negative." And it can be done, he says, through "goals, words and actions" embodied in an honest public relations effort.

"Schools don't hesitate to hire accountants or lawyers," Bernays says, "so why shouldn't they hire counsel that understands public relationships—many of which have nothing to do with the teaching process?

"You have to teach the public," he adds, "but you have to deal with the public differently than you do an individual in the classroom."

## 'The Most Important Task We Face'

John H. Wherry, executive director of the National School Public Relations Assn., puts it this way:

Building and maintaining public confidence in education is the most important single task we face. And the effort demands that education develop sophisticated understanding of the public relations process.

Education can no longer afford the naive view that public relations is only publicity through newspapers, radio and TV; that PR is telling people just those things that make schools look good; that PR is just a cosmetic approach to dealing with our problems. Unfortunately, many educators equate public relations and propaganda. And then wonder why they are not trusted!

The school district public relations process is a complex, demanding one. It serves in many respects as the *conscience* of the school district winning support from internal and external publics alike by seeing that the right thing is done—by demanding the kind of responsible institutional behavior that commands public support.

Through a planned and systematic two-way process of communication with our internal and external publics, we build morale, goodwill, cooperation and support by letting our constituents and our staff know what our goals are, our achievements and our plans, by getting their reactions then making adjustments as needed.

In a nutshell, public relations is a matter of doing the right thing and making sure that people know about it.

And, public relations is a **top-level management responsibility.** It deals with the very essence of what our schools are all about and it must receive priority attention.

## Begin Today

Thus, the advice of three experts in their fields: Don't sit back and wring your hands, bemoaning the fate of education. Get out and argue education's case in your community. Open up two-way communication with your community. Find out your community's aspirations, desires and demands.

Set your goals. Project a "compelling, forward-looking agenda." Accept your social responsibility. Monitor your actions and your behavior. And, defend education as a vital component of American democracy.

# HUMAN RELATIONS

Obviously, there are some "givens" when you're talking about better public relations. If a school district is mismanaged, and money misspent, and its students poorly educated, all the public relations programs in the world won't do much toward restoring public confidence. If the community is generally ignored except during a financial or other crisis time, the efforts to restore public confidence could require reorganization of the operation of the entire school district.

But, realistically, it is a rare school district that finds itself in such dire circumstances. Most school districts in this country are run by competent, caring professionals: most board of education members either are elected or appointed because they are community members who want to get involved; and most school districts do have at least basic community relations programs.

Yet, sometimes we are our own worst enemies.

School boards argue among themselves, and with the community, and many times with the superintendent they hired. Teachers argue with administrators and the school board. Administrators unionize and talk tough and lob verbal hand grenades back at teacher union invectives.

We argue about back-to-basics versus relevant education, about class size and working conditions and fringe benefits, about who is to blame for declining test scores, about accountability and productivity, and about vandalism and violence.

We castigate each other over declining enrollments, closing schools, desegregation, politics, bureaucracies, finances, community advisory committees and plenty of other things.

A recent survey in a large school district asked all school employes, "If you had a choice, would you have your children attend our schools?" Sixty-one percent said, "No." If that's what we think of ourselves, what does that do to public confidence in our schools?

It's no wonder, then, that education suffers a crisis of public confidence when the public looks at the fishbowl that is education today and sees not only rapidly rising taxes but also dissension and disorder among the troops.

The problem here is not mismanagement but simply human relations. The solution is better interpersonal communication.

Yes, there are bound to be disagreements and a certain amount of internal debate is healthy in any endeavor. But the invective and mistrust that permeates far too much of today's educational establishment is a growing cancer that threatens the very roots of the establishment as it fights to restore the public confidence that once, not too many years ago, was just about unquestioned.

It stands to reason that until education gets its own act together, its job of restoring public confidence is, at best, an uphill struggle.

Perhaps the great Russian writer Fedor Dostoevski summed up the situation when he said, "If people around you are spiteful and callous and will not hear you, fall down before them and ask their forgiveness. For, in truth, you have caused them to be as they are."

Chapter 3.

# First Things First— What Do They Think? What Do They Know?

Once a school district decides to mount an effective public relations program, or to improve its existing program, the first thing it should do is to find out what its citizens think about their schools. And the best way to find out is through a **public opinion poll.**

Every community has its own pulse, its own hearbeat, its own likes and dislikes, different feelings and emotions, different causes for agitation and alarm, and different reasons for being satisfied with the status quo. And each community, almost without exception, has some very strong feelings, both pro and con, about its schools.

School boards and administrators may *think* they know what their community feels, but rarely do they *know*. Usually only two small segments of the community take the time to make their thoughts known at the board or administration level. These are the critics, who waste little time complaining about almost anything, and the back slappers, who smile and praise you and tell you how wonderful everything is.

It is only human nature to dismiss the critics as radicals and to accept the findings of the back slappers. But, in truth, the real pulse of the community usually lies between the stances represented by these two groups.

One of the best ways to find that pulse is through a continuous, 12-month, two-way dialogue with parents, community groups and concerned individuals through a planned program of community relations.

But there is also another way for the school district to take its public's pulse—through an opinion poll that systematically surveys the attitudes of a community toward its schools.

Such a poll does not mean a few telephone calls to PTA presidents, leaders of local service clubs and friends of school board members. Rather, it means a scientific, systematic, random sampling of attitudes throughout the community—young and old, with or without children in the schools, friendly and hostile alike.

A good, professional opinion research organization can scientifically survey a few hundred citizens in a school district and determine with great accuracy what a school district needs to do to improve, or win back, the confidence of its community.

Or a school district can conduct such an opinion poll itself, as long as it has the technical expertise to develop an accurate profile of the residents of its district from which to draw the random sample.

Gretchen D. Shilts, president of the Board of Governors of the Fairfield-Suisun (Calif.) Unified School District, puts it this way: "Any district hoping for two-way communication between itself and its various publics should definitely consider an opinion poll. How can we otherwise know if our parents and patrons are satisfied and informed?"

But before a school district takes such a survey, there are certain basic questions it should consider. They are:

- Will it be a mail-out survey, a carry-home and carry-back survey, a telephone survey, a personal interview or a combination of those?

- Is the district asking questions that it *can* and *will* respond to with action if necessary? (For example, if parents indicate dissatisfaction with your favorite project, are you willing to change it or dump it? If you aren't, don't ask the question. On the other hand, don't avoid asking questions about issues you *know* parents are concerned about.)

- Do you have an adequate timeline and an adequate budget? Most surveys take about six weeks when done well. *Good* surveys always cost money, with the price depending upon how the survey is taken.

- Are you going to surprise the staff, or involve them from the early stages, so they see it as a management tool, not a threat?

- Who will be responsible for details and follow-up? If you can afford it, have an outside agency conduct your survey. Usually, the cost is no higher than doing it yourself when you consider labor costs. They have more expertise, use proven systems, and give your responders the anonymity which is necessary in a reliable survey.

Her district, Shilts says, has used a computer-analyzed opinion survey annually at a cost of under $200 per school for its 21 schools and has found it "a reliable way to gain parent input into the operation of its schools." And the district has learned more with each survey, she says.

Her advice for a good survey:

✓ The questions should be short, and ask for yes, no, undecided or insufficient information responses. That insufficient information column is helpful to your public information department. If you are anticipating a finance election, for example, and ask the question, "Do you think your school district spends its money in a reasonable way?" and 40% can't answer because they don't have enough information, the work of your public information department is cut out of them

✓ Keep the survey short! Perhaps the single biggest mistake of school districts in their surveying is trying to find out how parents feel about everything. Pick out 12 or 15 of the most important issues or concerns and limit yourself to those. Keep the survey to a single page

✓ The first districtwide survey can result in some very disturbing information. An untroubled district may expect that high percentages of parents will support them. Their survey may not reflect that. The general support of parents who respond to community surveys usually is not as strong as boards and administrators would like it—or expect it—to be.

Shilts counsels that the survey that is carried home by students and returned by them "is hardly better than no survey at all" unless the response rate is at least 70%-80%, because it does not involve citizens without children in school, citizens who must be included if the community profile is to be an accurate one.

The most reliable survey, she says, is a random sample survey done through a firm that specializes in market research or opinion polling. One caution, though: make sure you determine the full cost of designing, implementing and reporting such a survey before you begin.

Once you have the results, then what? Shilts has some suggestions:

- Prior to public release of the information (which should be done), study the percentages carefully. Look for reflected national, statewide and local trends. Look for causes of high scores and low ones. Discuss the results with building-level principals (if your survey was broken down by school areas) before the results will be shared among administrators and staffs.

- Establish a strategy and a commitment to bring low scores up to acceptable standards. Priorities are needed here. Build the strategy into your district's management and accountability plans. Don't forget to include the public relations specialist in your plans—since most districts will find specialized assistance along these lines essential in changing opinions.

On releasing the results, Shilts advises:

✓ A special presentation at an open board meeting, reviewing results, and centering around interpretation. It is helpful to have your surveying agency (or team) assist in the presentation of data

✓ Concurrent with the board release, have press releases ready, covering the same areas. Where results are negative, incorporate the management response. Don't be frightened to admit that, in some instances, the results are unacceptable and that the district intends to take action to change them

✓ Have press releases or writing assistance available to the building principals who might wish to share the results with their local community through school-based newsletters, etc.

Shilts has one last piece of advice: test again a year later to see if you have been able to change community opinion through your efforts following the first survey.

"A one-shot survey is helpful," she says, "but a district that truly listens, listens annually. You might feel that such a procedure is expensive. Perhaps. But isn't it better to find out your opinion-changing strategy isn't working in the first year, than to go on and discover it five years later?"

Chapter 4.

# Where Do You Start

Too many school districts looking to develop a public relations program fail to realize that they already have one, and it may be a disaster.

Scott W. Tilden, director of public relations, U. of New Haven, West Haven, Conn., puts it this way:

> Whether you acknowledge it or not, there's a PR program underway in your district right now. Each day, your district interacts with its local community. Secretaries greet visitors to your buildings. Bus drivers meet parents and students at dawn, and share local roadways throughout the day. Teachers deal directly with the "clients" of the district—students—and their parents. The switchboard operator may speak with as many community members as all other staff combined.
>
> Each of these groups in its own way fosters the image of your school in its community. Does the secretary finish up that routine filing before greeting a lost visitor at the counter? Will a bus driver keep the red light on the bus flashing during rush hour while Johnnie runs down his half-mile driveway? Does the teacher's first contact with a parent come after Suzie flunks the first quarter? Does that caller feel like the switchboard operator is doing him a favor by putting his call through?
>
> Like it or not, these daily events can do as much (or as little) for your district as 10 full-page photo spreads in the newspaper.

The problem, then, is not really starting a public relations program. It's doing a better job with the one you have. And that takes one major ingredient: **commitment.**

It takes active commitment—not just passive acceptance—from the superintendent, from the board of education, from the other top administrators, and from the principals and teachers in each school.

And, after commitment comes **analysis.** What does your community really think of you? What do they want from you? What irks them the most? Do you have a citizens advisory committee? Have you ever taken a community survey? Have you ever told your community about your goals and expectations? Have you ever invited the community to share in setting up goals and priorities? Do you have a board policy on communication and public relations? Do you have inservice courses to help your staff deal more effectively with their many publics?

These are the kinds of questions that must be asked. And according to Bernays, the most important one deals with a **community survey.** "You need a clear picture produced by public opinion analysis," he says. "You must know what your community expects of education, what your community's knowledge or ignorance is of education, and what your community's hopes, aspirations and desires are as to education."

## Getting Organized To Begin

Then, armed with this knowledge, Bernays says, "You must define your goals in as simple terms as the Ten Commandments or the Four Freedoms or the 14 Points." Also, he says, "you have to define them on the basis of the three time elements that go into goals: short-term, intermediate, and long-term."

Of primary importance, he continues, is to "get away from hunch, to use sound procedures based on factfinding and socially sound goals."

The school public relations planning process, Bernays says, should involve the following:

1. A statement of goals
2. A statement of research pertaining to the goals
3. A statement of school district reorientation that must be accomplished in light of the research and new goals
4. A definition of the strategy you are going to use in accomplishing your goals

5. The timing of your tactics to accomplish your goals

You must have a systems outline, he says, in which "you write a drama that hasn't happened yet, in which every step of the drama, every appearance of every actor, every scene is outlined . . . yet, all are subject to change."

## Some Why's and Wherefores

H. Vaughn Phelps, superintendent of the West Side Community Schools in Omaha, Neb., and former president of the American Assn. of School Administrators, offers the following reasons for planning a school public relations program:

- To affirm the school district's commitment to communication.
- To assure a planned, systematic, two-way communication plan for the district.
- To support staffing, funding and support for a communication program.
- To improve interpersonal relationships with citizens and staff.
- To develop and maintain working relationships with the press.
- To provide an awareness of the overall importance of communication.
- To maintain community understanding and support.
- To support a communication program at the local, state and national levels.

Phelps urges boards of education to draft policies that will support:

✓ Establishment of a communication and community relations program for the district

✓ A news policy based upon honesty, openness and fairness

✓ Recognition of the schools as an integral part of the community

✓ The concept that institutions, including schools, are built and improved through shared ideas, not only within the system

✓ The formation of advisory groups

✓ The participation of parents and other community resources in school programs

✓ A rational plan and procedures for community use of school facilities and grounds

✓ Guidelines for distribution of materials, the conduct of promotions and contests and soliciting of funds from school personnel or students

✓ Communication between and among governmental agencies

✓ A plan for communication in the event of a disaster.

## Guidelines for a Board Policy

George Richard, member of the East Baton Rouge (La.) Parish School Board, offers the following guidelines for setting up a public relations program in a school district:

1. First, board members should recognize that citizens have a right to know what is happening in their school system; that board members and central office staff have an obligation to see that all publics are kept systematically and adequately informed; and that the school system will benefit from seeing that citizens get all information, good and bad, directly from the system itself.

2. In order to develop a systematic communication system for the school district, a committee should be appointed by the board that includes board members, staff members and community experts in the field of communication. The group should be large enough to brainstorm all ideas, but not so large as to be hampered by the number of members.

3. The first important step this committee must take is to develop a policy statement for the school board which will commit the system to development of a program for open communication with its

various publics. The statement should be broad enough to serve as the goals of the public relations program for the system.

4. Once the policy statement has been adopted and publicized, the committee should develop guidelines for work which will include what their final report to the board will cover, and a timeline for activities.

5. A staff member with strong communication skills should be placed in charge of the main research and development procedures as directed by the committee.

6. The committee should secure workable background information on what is being done in the area of school public relations around the country, and then make an assessment of what is being done in their own system. This analysis should include an evaluation of all communication presently being used.

7. Using the policy statement adopted by the board, the committee should develop goals for open communication between the school system and its publics. These goal statements will form the basis of the public relations program and will be used in the selection of the activities to be initiated the first year.

8. An initial list of many different techniques for communicating with both the internal and external publics of the school system should be developed to insure a systematic way of meeting the system-wide goals. These publics will include obvious ones such as the parents, taxpayers and teachers, as well as other important ones such as secretaries, bus drivers, lunchroom workers, custodians and maintenance workers.

9. The committee report to the board should contain the goal statements of the public relations program and the activities which will help meet those goals. It should be organized in such a way that there is little doubt how communication can be initiated. Provisions must be made for both an adequate staff and adequate funding to insure the success of the program during the first year on, perhaps, a trial basis. Accountability procedures should be included so the results of the program can be carefully analyzed.

10. The basic staff should include an efficient, reliable secretary and a staff member who knows the system well and has exceptional communication skills.

## Getting a Formal Program Underway

Check your state laws. Many legislatures have done some of the preliminary legwork for you. Sunshine laws and open public meeting acts may have mandated some of the kinds of communication that public bodies in your state must prepare.

Prepare a formal district policy for your board of education to approve. It should include:

- Reasons for adopting the policy;
- What the policy is designed to do;
- General means of implementation;
- Delegation of the responsibility for the program from the board to the chief administrator or designate;
- Provisions for periodic evaluation.

The policy, once passed, should be duplicated and distributed throughout the school or district and its community.

## Balance These Four

A good school-community relations program balances four characteristics:

1. **Two-way communication.** A good PR program listens as much as it talks. Column inches of newspaper space and minutes of radio time are important, but public relations based on what's happening is more important.
2. **For all people.** Employes, students and teachers—the internal publics—are as important as editors, legislators and Rotarians. In fact, a well-informed internal public can serve as several thousand extra eyes, ears and mouthpieces in the community.
3. **Systematic.** Use of the newspaper to the exclusion of all other media won't get the message across. Community newsletters alone won't work, either. The communication specialist must systematically identify each segment of the public and decide upon the

best medium to use to communicate with each—print, radio/TV, group meetings, etc.

4. **Continuous.** School PR is a year-round operation. How strange it is that the same school that's been sunshine and roses for three years and nine months could spontaneously and coincidentally crumble into its foundation for the three months around bond issue approval time. A good communication program says "good" when there's good and "problem" when there are difficulties.

## Allocate the Necessary Resources

The most creative, innovative and wide-reaching board policy will be useless without proper support to carry it out. Too often, public relations becomes responsibility #41 added to the job description of an already-overworked administrator. Consequently, the PR assignment gets a when-I-get-around-to-it priority.

Best, of course, is employment of a full-time educational communication specialist. The National School Public Relations Assn. maintains a personnel clearinghouse for educational PR professionals.

NSPRA also conducts an annual seminar to train and to update the skills of district communication specialists. In addition, the association also conducts staff development workshops to improve the communication skills of administrators, principals, teachers, board of education members, parents and support staff members.

If a full-time PR specialist seems out of the question to start, consider part-time help. Often, a graduate student in educational PR or in journalism can arrange for an internship at your school. Perhaps a local reporter or a retired person could help. Or a journalism teacher could be given a reduced teaching load to take on added PR responsibilities.

Clerical help is required, too. It's "pennywise but pound foolish" to pay a specialist to perform routine duplicating, collating and envelope-stuffing. Work-study students or a business/typing class might help.

## Cost-Free Ways to Aid the PR Office

Not all the resources cost money. A deep, obvious commitment to PR on the part of the chief school administrator is essential. "An administrator'' asking for input and assistance from the faculty and staff is one thing. But ''*the* administrator'' emphasizing the importance of PR can motivate even the most reluctant employe. ''Tokenism'' is quickly identified and programs without this commitment are in trouble from the start.

The communication specialist should be brought in as a key member of the administrative cabinet, reporting directly to the chief school administrator. Many decisions made by the school have direct communication ramifications. Budget and bond campaigns, test score results, busing plans—all are topics with important communication angles. Proper preparation of the community by the communication specialist could help prevent embarrassing headlines later and reduce the feeling within the community that the school is ''putting something over on them.''

Also, the communication specialist is in close contact with representatives of the local news media. On occasion, reporters need to contact the chief school administrator on an urgent or fast-breaking story. In such cases, the communication specialist needs direct access to the administrator for fast, accurate responses in time for media deadlines. If reporters can't get the facts quickly from school officials, they'll get them from somewhere else—possibly incorrectly.

## The Next Step: Getting the Feel of the Community

The public relations specialist should **meet the media representatives.** Buy and read all the local newspapers. Listen to all the radio stations. One at a time, meet individual editors and managers to find out how the schools can help them. You'll find that approach is a lot more successful than asking how they can help you. The communication specialist should give media representatives a home telephone number in case they need a school spokesperson after hours. Unfortunately, all news doesn't break between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., five days a week.

**Meet the community.** Take a look at your community in general. Get a copy of the most recent census taken in the area. See if a demographic study has ever been done. Look in the files to see what communication tools have been tried in the past, and which were successful.

**Analyze the power base**—both formal and informal. Does the PTA president hold the power, or does the woman who sits in the back of the room knitting really make all the decisions. The difference could be important.

**Cultivate the most influential community members** into a group of "Key Communicators." Collect the names of people who are active, respected and listened-to in your community. Seek out their input on various school policies. Show them that the school *is* interested in hearing from the community. You'll get accurate input from the community, and you'll win several new "friends" for the schools.

Then, when a crisis happens, you've got a core of respected community leaders who can help get information out to the public. One or two calls could start a telephone chain and reach the community quickly.

## But, What About the Cost?

As NSPRA Executive Director John H. Wherry points out, "The argument sometimes offered that a school district just can't afford a public relations program falls apart pretty quickly when you consider how much staff time is already being spent on public relations activities.

A recent study in New Jersey showed that an average of 37% of the superintendent's time was spent in communication or public relations related activities," Wherry continues. "You also need to consider that at least the same percentage of time is spent on PR by school principals, and that teachers spend at least 10% of their time on PR by even the narrowest definition of the term. School secretaries including telephone time and other communication activities are spending 60% of their time on public relations by conservative estimates, and other support staff members, including custodians, foodservice employes, bus drivers and maintenance personnel, also spend a surprising amount of time communicating with each other, students, parents and the general public as well."

"The fact is," he says, "if we would compute the percentage of each employe's time spent in public relations and multiply that by their annual salary, we would find that we are already spending a great deal on public relations. The question *really* is, are we getting our money's worth? A coordinated, districtwide public relations program can make the money we are already spending on PR much more effective."

## PR Programs Are Not Frills

An October 1977 special report released by the Pennsylvania School Boards Assn. (PSBA) said just that. The work of the 32-member commission, sponsored by PSBA to develop recommendations for "strengthening the working relationships of school boards and superintendents" and composed of school board members, district superintendents and intermediate unit administrators from across the state, made the following statement:

### Communications

The commission believes that an elected school board, and the administrators hired to carry out public policy, have a mandate to communicate to all citizens.

The commission believes that planned, organized and effective communications are essential if the school's employes are to perform their assigned tasks as effectively and efficiently as possible. Effective school management and communication responsibilities cannot be separated. The commission asserts that improved understanding between school officials and the community-at-large hinges directly on the working relationship between the board and the superintendent. The relationship of the local school board to government and its place in the governmental structure are important considerations in school board operation. An understanding of this relationship contributes to more effective leadership and communication by the local board.

Governing boards of school directors are generally one of the largest (if not *the* largest) employers in local communities. The news media cannot satisfy the total communication needs that such an employer requires to ensure that the district operates efficiently and effectively on a day-to-day basis. The commission supports the position, therefore, that planned communication programs (requiring some public expenditures) which can be supported, evaluated and measured, provide a long term benefit for students. Such programs are not frills. The commission feels that honest, straightforward two-way communication programs between local school officials and their constituents are absolutely necessary in retaining public confidence and support for public schools.

The commission, therefore, recommends that:

- Boards should have an approved and responsible communications policy which is shared with, and understood by, the school-community.

- School districts should prepare a board-superintendent brochure and other handouts for public board meetings which include, for example, legal requirements of the board and the superintendent's office, meeting dates and times, and how the public may address the board.

- Boards and superintendents should develop a staff newsletter which goes to all employes in order that the staff has an opportunity to better understand board-superintendent business and operations.
- School boards should establish guidelines and responsibility for communication with the news media on a regular and on-going basis.
- Boards should establish communication systems that will provide responsive feedback between the board and its various publics.
- School boards should provide an annual report to the community explaining the school district's programs, services and its progress.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

## Good Public Relations Begin at Home

Perhaps the most universally overlooked instrument for improving or restoring public confidence in a school district is internal communication.

Yet, no one is more detrimental to a school district's image than an uninformed employe, who spends less than 20% of his or her life each year at work and more than 80% out in the community.

How many school maintenance workers or bus drivers have been asked by their neighbors: "Hey, what's all this about a bond issue?" And how many have replied, "How the hell should I know? They never tell me anything."

How many teachers have been asked in the supermarket or at the pool or at bridge club about open education, or back to basics, or closing schools due to declining enrollment? And how many have replied in exactly the same way as their fellow worker above?

How many school secretaries have had to switch a distraught caller to central administration because they didn't know the answer to how the school board's latest pupil assignment policy affected that particular school?

Such questions are endless. Unfortunately, their answers all too often have a familiar ring: many school districts do an inadequate job of communicating with their own employes.

The fact is, purely and simply, good public relations begins at home.

Within each school or district are numerous potential conveyors of accurate, school-related information. These spokespersons are faculty and staff members.

Think about it. Whom do you trust more for accurate school information? Do you rely on that newspaper you get at breakfast each morning? Or, do you look to a respected neighbor down the street—the one who's a teacher and works in the school?

Most persons collect school information from both of these sources. In fact, according to a recent nationwide Gallup Poll commissioned by the National School Boards Assn., 60% of adults listed "newspapers, TV and radio" as likely sources of school news. And 32% of adults cited "friends and neighbors" as their next most likely source.

An informed and supportive faculty and staff, especially in smaller communities, can help boost that percentage.

## Setting Up a Program

John T. Holton, public information officer of the Wilmington, Del., public schools, outlines the steps necessary in setting up a comprehensive, effective internal communication program.

### Program Objectives

- Improved staff morale; people work better when they are part of a two-way communication system

- Improved staff efficiency; if people know the game they are playing and the rules, they can do a better job

- Improved decision making; if a program is truly two-way and decision-makers are getting input, it will be better and more useful if it is coming from informed people

- Improved external public relations, on two counts: one, if you are doing things better and people are happier, you're just going to look better to the public; two, a well-informed and involved staff and student body becomes a little army of PR ambassadors.

### Program Requirements

- ✓ The program must be based on written board policy, endorsed by the superintendent, and have someone specifically responsible for it
- ✓ The program should meet the same high standards that apply to external PR: honest, timely, two-way flow, variety of media, etc.
- ✓ The program should be developed by a committee representing the various internal audiences which assesses the needs, identifies the audiences, designs the components and evaluates the program.

### Getting Started

It's not easy to get people to believe you and to commit the time and money, but one of the following usually gets them:

- ✓ A logical discussion of the objectives mentioned above
- ✓ An emotional discussion of last year's problems (how many could have been avoided or easily solved through communication)
- ✓ Use clearly demonstrated board and superintendent support as a lever
- ✓ Get "good communication policies and procedures" put in job descriptions and evaluations
- ✓ Use the carrot—prestige, more budget support, volunteer recruitment.

### Program Considerations—

- ✓ Communications level; a truly comprehensive internal program includes all employes, therefore, the level of material must be varied to meet various audiences
- ✓ Variety of media; you are competing for people's time and attention, so give them a variety of ways to get information, i.e., audio-visual, written, face-to-face

✓ Make the best program you can under the following constraints; size of district/school/audience; timing, getting the information while it is fresh; regularity, don't be haphazard; selectivity of information, set priorities; cost.

## Internal Audiences

Each of the following groups, while sharing common information needs, have specific information needs: teachers, central administrators, superintendents and top management, aides, secretaries, custodians, maintenance men, cafeteria workers, nurses, librarians, students, counselors, principals, bus drivers, substitutes, volunteers, crossing guards, supervisors, school board, teacher organization leadership.

## Communications Needs

✓ New programs

✓ New or changed policy

✓ Table of organization and personnel changes

✓ Pay and fringe benefits

✓ Advancement and training opportunities

✓ Local and state events affecting education

✓ National education trends

✓ What's happening in other schools

✓ Plant operations

✓ Board actions

✓ Budget and financial data

✓ Problems

✓ Calendar information.

**Components of Internal PR Program** (many of the techniques used in communicating with external audiences are readily adapted to communicating with staff and students):

*Personal Contact:* Board and superintendent visit schools, central administrators teach a class, cabinet/advisory committees meet regularly with superintendent/principal, true open door policy with a set time or out on their turf, socialize, student/staff gripe sessions, internal speaker's bureau, school family/administrative staff meetings, tours and staff exchanges, hiring interviews, exit interviews, orientation, buddy system, negotiations, evaluation, staff/student task committees, board meetings, inservice day, conferences.

*Words and Pictures:* Employe manual, specialized handbooks, board report, pay check stuffers, staff newsletter, audiovisual, calendars, facts and figures folders, annual report, news media, budget report, idea trading post, special purpose publications, curriculum guides, letters, contract, bulletins, happy-grams, name tags, meeting minutes, recruiting brochure, student news posters.

*Processes of Communication:* Recognition at board meetings, clean school contests, teacher/student/etc. of the month award, platform protocol, key communicators, information services or rumor control system, teaching about school in school, sub-group presentations.

## Cross Flow of Information

Don't just think in terms of up and down communications, or from center to group. There is an important need for information to flow within groups and between groups at the same level (simple example: does a teacher tell the cafeteria manager that the seventh grade will be on a field trip Friday?); exchange meeting minutes; send memo copies to anyone who might eventually be affected; provide time or space for one division to tell others what's new; set up opportunities for people to meet through tours or staff exchanges.

## Feed Back and Evaluation

At a minimum, have the committee charged with setting up the program meet periodically to check status. Also, use suggestion boxes, questionnaires, polling techniques, personal contacts, and internal key communicators.

## If You Have A Lot of News

While many school districts find a monthly newsletter is one effective means of communicating with its staff, and some step up the pace to publishing weekly staff newsletter, the Dallas Independent School District puts out a daily publication for its staff.

Rodney Davis, director of communications for the Dallas schools, explains the need for a daily publication: Each day, staff members at a central administration office receive hundreds of calls from citizens with questions about the schools. How does the PR person make sure that employes are kept up-to-date about happenings in the school system? One way might be to start a daily newsletter for them. Maybe it sounds like a lot of time and trouble on your part, but in Dallas it has proven effective not only in keeping employes—but also members of the news media—informed about happenings throughout the school district.

If you decide on a daily or a weekly, for that matter, newsletter, Davis proposes that the following steps should be followed:

1. The first step in the production of a daily newsletter is to choose a name and format for the publication, and decide upon a schedule of deadlines. A person is appointed to write and edit the publication, and printing and distribution procedures are developed. It is important that the format be simple in order that the publication can be quickly written, produced, and distributed on a day-to-day basis.

2. Decide upon the best way of gathering the information. For example, in Dallas the communication department receives each day a copy of all materials produced in the central duplicating shop. This includes memos, board documents, meeting announcements, and other duplicated materials. Also, a check is made each day of the general superintendent's calendar; a telephone call is made to each of the assistant superintendents; and items are also picked up from local, state and national educational newsletters and news releases. In addition, the department receives tips from employes on personal items of interest.

3. Write the newsletter late in the day so that the most timely items will make the next morning's news. Features, of course, can be written ahead of time for use as needed. In Dallas, the daily newsletter features a "Who's Who" from time-to-time on individual employes at the central office. This has been found to be one of the most popular items in the newsletter since nearly everyone enjoys seeing his or her name in print. In addition, a weekly calendar of events is included in Dallas' DAILY DISPATCH.

4. Have a good system of distribution and don't forget to send copies to members of the news media. The DISPATCH in Dallas is one way of keeping news media people informed about happenings in the district. The publication not only focuses on happenings in the school administration building, but also district-wide school news received from people in the schools. An effort is made to note significant items several days in advance, particularly for the convenience of the news media. Reporters pick up a number of feature ideas from the DISPATCH each week.

5. Evaluate the newsletter from time to time to see if people are reading the publication and are interested in its content. A readership survey as part of the publication is a good method.

6. File all copies of the newsletter on a yearly basis. **The newsletter is a good history of happenings in the district.**

So now you know where you must begin—at least theoretically. You need to recognize the need for and make a commitment to an active public relations program. You need a board policy, goals for the program and a job description for the person to head the program. To help you develop these, sample policies and job program descriptions are included in the appendix, see pp. 207-218.

The next chapters of this book will deal with the implementation of the program.

## Chapter 5.

# Key Audiences

The ways in which a school district can communicate to its publics are almost countless. But, it's critical to determine *who* you're communicating when deciding *how*. Communication, the unplanned variety, occurs thousands of times a day as students and staff wend their way homeward and talk with their families about what went on during the day.

Communication occurs when a tired secretary answers the telephone for the umpteenth time; when a school crossing guard holds up a motorist in a hurry; when a parent looks at a bad report card; when a citizen reads a story about the budget going up again; when a school bus stops traffic on a busy street in the middle of morning rush hour traffic; when a couple of students tromp across a homeowner's prize-winning flowers.

Thus, the wise school district plans a structured communications program to counteract the vagaries of the community's day-to-day contact with its public schools.

## KEY COMMUNICATORS

And the foundation of that structure certain key types of communication, with perhaps the simplest, and often most overlooked, being a network of key individual communicators within the community itself.

Donald R. Bagin, professor of communications at Glassboro (N.J.) State College, puts it this way:

> In every school and in every community, people exist who talk to large numbers of people; when these people are believed and trusted by many others, they become key communicators. School officials who identify these key communicators and involve them in efforts to inprove two-way communications between the school and its publics usually reap the rewards of greater confidence in the schools and fewer rumor-caused crises.
>
> Key communicators inform administrators of rumors that are still sparks, allowing them to be easily quelled. Result: no raging fires in the community. Key communicators allow administrators to feel the pulse of the entire community with phone calls to them. Key communicators, because they develop solid rapport with administrators, help the community gain confidence in those administrators.

Bagin offers the following example of the "key communicators" idea in action:

> A black student and a white student in a junior high school were caught fighting in a school hall during the passing of classes. The black student was suspended; the white student wasn't. If the staff, students and community had only those facts to work with, the community would have been in a turmoil within two hours of dismissal of students. The additional facts were that the black student had been in two previous such fights and his parents had been told by the principal that one more fight would result in suspension. The incident was the first offense for the other student. The principal, who had established the key communicators concept internally and externally, called in his 12 student key communicators and 12 staff key communicators before school was dismissed to explain the facts. The principal also started the telephone chain explanation to key communicators in the community. The result: no problems.

Bagin adds: "It can be done in every school with the principal responsible for establishing the group and the process. it can also be done on a districtwide basis. In any event, school officials get together with other informed people to determine who those people are who are talking to and believed by a large number of people. These people may be barbers, beauticians and others who have captive audiences. They may be postmasters or fast food store managers or hoagie shop operators. They may be PTA presidents or crossing guards."

Once the key communicators are identified, they should be invited to a meeting, preferably over lunch, or at least coffee and cake, with the principal or with the superintendent.

While the concept should be launched on a district-wide basis, it functions best on a school-by-school basis, particularly in larger school districts. Thus, while a superintendent can kick off the program with a luncheon for certain "key communicators" from throughout the district to explain the program in detail, individual meetings at the building level will be most productive.

Invitations should be in writing, with a full explanation of the "key communicators" concept. The letter should be followed up by a telephone call from the school. The meeting should be informal, an hour or less, and to the point.

Most of all, it should convey the school's appreciation for the service of these key people in the community, and the school's willingness to be open, frank, and honest with its key communicators in return for their help.

## PARENTS

Perhaps the next most overlooked concept of school communications is **relationships** with parents.

Too often, the parent is taken for granted, the parent-teacher conference is a pro forma exercise, parent's night accomplishes little, and parents go away mad.

Arthur L. Mallory, commissioner of education for the Missouri Dept. of Education, writing in the *Journal of Educational Communication*, says:

> The biggest "educational" job to be done in America today is with the parents of the young people attending our schools. I am not talking about adult or continuing education programs. Nor am I talking about parental shortcomings, parental responsibilities, or parental blame for any of the real or imagined failings of our schools.
>
> I am talking about solving the many "larger-than-life" yet fundamental problems now faced by public education across the nation. I'm referring to curriculum problems, the size of classes, lack of discipline, pupils' lack of interest and school board policies, as well as proper financial support for our schools.

The answer to many of the problems facing our schools is parent involvement. Rapidly, it is becoming almost axiomatic that wherever you find a really successful educational program—regardless of the standards used in the evaluation—you will also find a strong, expanding program of parent involvement.

## The Parent-Teacher Conference

Perhaps the first place to start in improving parent-school relationships is with the parent-teacher conference.

Says Doris A. Payne, former director of community relations of the Central Bucks (Pa.) School District: Successful parent-teacher conferences require considerable planning for teachers and parents if both are to provide input and both are to take away some new information about a particular child. When that happens, the best communication can take place—two people face to face, each speaking and listening to the other, each asking questions. For many parents, this is their only contact with the school.

Payne suggests a mini-workshop for staff with veteran teachers role-playing conferences and how to react to particular situations? If you ask for volunteers, you are more likely to get those who are comfortable with conferences. The others, as well as new teachers, can observe and then react.

But no one suggests conferences are a snap. Here are some tips which can make them easier for both teachers and parent.

- Begin on a positive note and listen closely and sympathetically. You'll learn things that will help you deal with each child.

- Get away from your desk and sit at a small conference table or student desk so there isn't a barrier between you and the parent.

- Be prepared—gather records such as grade sheets, papers and other examples of student work, test results or even notes passed.

- Jot down the main points you want to get across to parents, translating "pedagese" into simple language. Try to be specific.

- Focus on solutions which you and the parent arrive at jointly. Concentrate on one or two areas rather than sending parents away with a bushel of questions.

If parent-teacher conferences are to be well attended, they should be held at times when parents can come to school without too much inconvenience. Because more and more children come from families with working parents schools are rapidly changing the hours they set aside for conferences. Many now schedule time before school (or the parent's job) starts and in the evening and on Saturdays. Some districts supply a substitute for the teacher who has a heavy schedule of conferences' outside "normal" working hours. And, the new scheduling techniques have resulted in an increased number of fathers attending the meetings.

## Helping the Parent Communicate

A wise school district also helps parents prepare for the parent-teacher conference, too, for an unprepared parent can make the conference almost as unproductive as can an uninformed teacher.

Through newsletters, PTA meetings, features in local newspapers and even TV and radio programs, some school districts emphasize this point, and help parents prepare for a truly productive parent-teacher meeting. These tips for parents are a compilation of ideas from the National School Public Relations Assn.:

### Preparing for a Conference

When preparing for the conference with your child's teacher:

- ✓ Make a list of things you want to tell the teacher about your child so that the teacher can understand the child better—his health, attitudes toward school, family relationships, hobbies and interests, etc.

- ✓ Decide what you want to ask the teacher. Discuss the conference with your child to see if there is anything he/she would like you to talk about with the teacher. Check with your spouse and decide which aspects of your child's schoolwork are puzzling or worrying you. Ideally, both parents should attend the conference. Do you have any gripes or complaints? Now is the time to get all the facts about a school situation you may only know about second hand.

- ✓ Don't bring the child with you unless requested. Also don't bring brothers and sisters. Check to see if the school provides babysitting services during conference time.

## During the Conference

Be at ease; the teacher is just as interested in the well-being of your child as you are.

Don't hesitate to ask questions, such as:

- What is my child's ability level? Is he/she working up to his/her ability?
- What group is he/she in? Why?
- How is my child doing in mathematics, reading, science, etc.? May I see some work samples?
- What books is he/she using?
- Has he/she shown any special interests or abilities?
- Does he/she get along well with classmates? Participate in group activities? Shown any leadership qualities?
- Are there discipline problems?

The teacher may have some questions for you about your child, such as:

- What is your child's reaction to school?
- How is after school time spent? What are his/her hobbies or special interests?
- How and where is homework done?
- What is your child's response to rules and responsibilities at home?
- What type of discipline works best at home?

Ask the teacher how you can help at home with any problem areas. Jot down notes at the conference or immediately after.

Toward the end of the conference, review with the teacher some of the action points you've discussed that might help your child do better. This might include such things as possible remedial work, improved study habits, revised goals, more understanding, outside reading, more credit being given for strengths, etc.

## After the Conference

If you forget the conference when you leave school, it isn't likely to have positive results. Followup actions include:

- Discuss the conference with your child. First, point out strengths. Then talk about the areas that need improvement.

- Start immediately on any action you have decided to take. Did the teacher recommend books for you or your child to read? Is there a better arrangement for studying at home? Is outside help needed in a special area? Begin at once to follow through with the plan you and the teacher decided upon.

- ✓ Feel free to call the school if you wish to check on your child's progress or if you think another conference is needed. Teachers generally value such interest on the part of parents.

- ✓ Make certain your child understands that you and the teacher are working together; that you and the teacher are in partnership, with the sole aim of helping him/her get the best education possible.

## How Did We Do?

Finally, parent-teacher conferences should be evaluated.

At the Central Bucks, Pa., schools, parents leaving a conference get a three-part questionnaire, asking: "Did the conference accomplish what you had hoped it would? What was the most effective part of the conference? What would you like to see done differently the next time to improve the conference?"

Using such evaluations techniques, parent-teacher conferences can be constantly restructured to meet the concerns of parents.

## Making Parents Partners

Another "better way" of parent involvement is the Parent Partnership Program of the Philadelphia public schools, begun by Supt. Michael P. Marcase in the summer of 1976 to achieve greater parental participation in the education of their children.

The program is composed of six components:

**Parent Workshops**—Monthly meetings are held throughout the school system which are designed to assist parents to become more effective in the total education of their children (especially preschool children) by helping to acquire an understanding of the various aspects of child development and to help parents to recognize, make and use learning materials in the home.

**Books for Tots**—This component provides parents of every preschool child in the city with books and other printed materials to foster the development of reading and reading-related skills in the home and to introduce young children to age-appropriate reading materials.

**Student Tutor Corps**—Older children provide tutorial help in the development and strengthening of basic skills of young children. Tutoring sessions occur throughout the city in private certified day care homes.

**Radio-TV Programs**—Programs are presented on public and commercial stations as well as closed-circuit in the schools. The presentations are designed to provide examples of educational/instructional activities that parents may participate in with their children while at home.

**Special Education Center**—The Center houses instructional materials and information geared for parents of children eligible for school district special education programs. Trained personnel at the Center assist parents in the development of materials and activities for use with handicapped children at home as well as provide immediate counseling services for parents. Periodic workshops in each district offer opportunities to "tailor" information, materials, and counseling services to specific needs of parents of handicapped children.

**Public Awareness**—A coordinated program to inform parents of school-age children and the community at large about the variety of Parent Partnership Program activities through print and broadcast media, and respond to individual inquiries about the program by providing printed information and sample materials tailored to specific personal requsts.

Each component of the Parent Partnership Program is being developed and operated at no additional cost to the school district. Many school district staff members contribute their time and effort to the Parent Partnership Program as a demonstration of their commitment to work with parents for the benefit of children.

## Town Meetings

Another effective communication tool is the Town Meeting. It's certainly not a new idea. It dates back to colonial times. But it worked then, and it still works today.

And there's a difference between a Town Meeting and a school board meeting. Although school board meetings out in the community are an excellent idea, and are discussed in another section of this book, they are, by nature, formal meetings with agendas and resolutions and speakers lists and rules and regulations and parliamentary procedure and the like.

Instead, why not go out into your community, perhaps one area at a time, with your superintendent and his top staff, and say, in effect, "We're here as long as you want us to answer your questions, to listen to your complaints, to communicate with you about your schools."

The meetings are open to all: parents, business and community leaders, clergy, politicians, teachers, principals, custodians, students; just about everyone with an interest in the schools. Personal invitations are mailed out to community leaders, and everyone in the community is made aware of the meetings via the news media and district newsletter.

Meetings were set up within a week between community and top staff to explore other matters needing long term solutions.

Town Meetings can bring the superintendent closer to the community in a totally informal, unstructured, relaxed format. The meetings often receive widespread, positive media coverage. And a stronger communications link is forged between the schools and the community they serve.

## CHURCHES

Still another key audience is the community's churches.

Joseph E. Hill, superintendent of the Evanston, Ill., public schools, puts it this way: "District 65 Public Schools and the superintendent recognized the influence that churches represent within that community and decided on a course of action for better communication between two strong institutions."

"District 65's working program with the churches in Evanston helped to tell the school story on a more personal level and as a result strengthened the bonds and communication between the churches and the schools. The program developed in the fall of 1974 as a way to introduce goals and objectives of the school system to the rest of the community."

We followed these steps, Hill continues:

- Invitations were sent to ministers and pastors for a Saturday morning breakfast with the superintendent of schools, central administrative staff and board of education members. At that time, the superintendent outlined the goals and objectives of the school system and asked for ideas and suggestions to improve communication for a "working together" atmosphere.

- The superintendent and staff then visited many of the churches for Sunday services and encouraged informal discussion about education from the congregation. The interest about school programming increased to provide programs, panel discussions and guest appearances by school staff set up at many of the churches. A follow-up Saturday breakfast with the ministers provided an opportunity for more in-depth talks on school/community related programs.
- An outgrowth of this interest was the establishment of tutorial centers in several of the churches aimed at helping neighborhood children on a one-to-one basis or small group tutoring in reading, math, etc. Church volunteers as well as teachers from that congregation encouraged a close atmosphere of learning and sharing. Students regularly attended these sessions.
- Press releases and newsletters were regularly sent to the churches to inform parents as well as nonparents of board meeting dates and school events. As a result, ministers who announced board meeting dates also became avid meeting observers.

Adds Hill: "The result of this program was the development of an ongoing communication program with the churches within their community to increase involvement, stimulate interest in school programs and successfully integrate "education" into the lives of community church-going residents. As availability of school staff members increased on Sunday, confidence in school programming and administration also increased. A two-way system of communication had been established."

## BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

Another key area of communication is business and industry.

Many school districts in large cities—among them, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Dallas, Houston and San Francisco, have cooperative programs whereby a business firm "adopts" a school, or a series of schools, and releases its employes part time to do volunteer work in the schools.

Volunteers work as tutors, classroom aides, career counselors and at a variety of other tasks.

In Detroit, an automobile company adopted a high school and turned a wing of the school into an automotive training center.

In Philadelphia, industry established an electrical academy in one high school, a business academy in another, and an aviation academy in a third, providing both equipment for the academies and expertise in setting them up.

In these type of cooperative arrangements, the schools gain help and encouragement from business, and volunteers gain new insights into the schools.

And although such arrangements began in the large cities, cooperative ventures with business and industry are important in smaller school districts, too, particularly in light of the rising tax burden borne by businesses for local schools.

Principals and superintendents should make it their business to seek out and communicate with local chambers of commerce and service clubs composed primarily of businessmen.

And school districts can find a ready talent pool in local business leaders to help solve management problems.

In Philadelphia, a massive project called Business Aide involved hundreds of accountants, computer programmers, personnel specialists, warehousemen, budget specialists, controllers and others joining force to help the city's public schools improve their management efficiency.

The program involved the school district, the Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Philadelphia Partnership, a progressive, public service partnership of the city's top executives from business and industry.

Employes furnished by business in the city worked at school business office locations, helping to institute new management procedures to increase fiscal efficiency. The result was more than $3 million in savings during 1976-77, and an outlook for even more savings in future years.

In the process, however, the business leaders were learning something, too. They were learning about federal, state and judicial mandates affecting education; about unions in the public sector; about the financial impact of compensatory instructional programs to combat poverty and environment; about the differences between efficiently producing cans of soup and educating young people.

They were learning, through this valuable, two-way communication, the problems of public education today; gaining a new insight into complex problems many of them had thought were caused by a simple lack of management expertise.

# VOLUNTEERS

Business and industry present only two sources of school volunteers. There are hundreds of others. They include parents, former teachers, high school students, senior citizens, service clubs, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, military installations, women's clubs and fraternal organizations.

And every volunteer a school district can bring in not only helps the schools, but he or she also becomes a key communicator.

That is why many school districts conduct volunteer recruitment drives. The following material is a general description of how many school districts have developed their programs.

The volunteers work in reading programs, lunchrooms, libraries, health rooms, guidance offices, remedial classes, gyms, classrooms and school offices.

The recruitment is done through a district-wide committee composed of a faculty member and a volunteer from each school. The committee identifies jobs for volunteers and recruits volunteers to fill the jobs.

A community newsletter is used in the campaign. So are notices to parents and stories in the local newspapers. And volunteers readily respond.

According to school district reports, the widespread use of volunteers can have these beneficial results (among others):

- Volunteers save money for the schools and give students more individual attention.
- They free teachers and staff from some of the necessary paperwork.
- Volunteers in the classroom usually result in fewer discipline problems because there is more adult supervision.
- Volunteers become a link between the school and the community.

Experience, however, has taught many districts that certain cautions must be observed and certain guidelines must be followed:

- ✓ Staff members often need to be "sold" on the contribution that volunteers can make.
- ✓ The program requires some kind of effective training program for the volunteers.
- ✓ To be effective, the program must be coordinated and supervised by someone.
- ✓ Someone in each school must be responsible for welcoming and supervising volunteers.

✔ Volunteers should be given some work that is challenging and interesting—their jobs shouldn't be all tedious paperwork.

It is also extremely important to recognize the work done by volunteers and to pat them genuinely on the back now and then.

One school district that does an excellent job is the Los Angeles schools. It annually declares "School Volunteer Recognition Month" and honors its 18,000 volunteers during this time at special awards programs, both centrally and in the schools. The theme of the district's volunteer recognition efforts is "LOVE—Lots of Volunteer Effort." The central recognition includes lunch for volunteer leaders, recognition of various volunteer groups, and a film highlighting volunteer work in the schools.

According to Sarah A. Davis, volunteer coordinator for the Los Angeles schools, the volunteers realized their efforts were appreciated by a great many people, public recogniation helped to hold veteran volunteers and to attract new ones, and the cost of recognition ceremonies was negligible compared with the money saved the schools by volunteers.

Some school districts, like Canton, Ohio, use elementary school children to make special presentations to thank volunteers. Many others present volunteers with certificates of appreciation, and others pay for volunteers to attend workshops in their respective fields.

In short, school districts throughout the country have found out that by recruiting a volunteer, they are helping out children and getting a good will ambassador to the community, all free of charge.

## SENIOR CITIZENS

By far the most overlooked person as a key communicator in school districts has been the senior citizen.

Maybe a rest home got some flowers from a class of children now and then, or some artwork, or possibly some food at holiday time. But the senior citizens, retired and with plenty of life to live—what school ever thought about them?

The answer was not too many.

But they're thinking about them now, as the "Gray Panthers" rise up around the country to cry out against increased school spending and the resultant tax burden on the elderly.

The key here is that the senior citizen need not be an adversary of the schools. He or she can be a friend and a key communicator in the community with a little help and recognition from school personnel.

## Getting Them Involved

There are many things senior citizens can do for the schools. And there are many things schools can do for senior citizens. For instance, schools can:

- Seek out and speak with senior citizen groups, urging their members to become school volunteers.
- Provide senior citizens with space for an activities center in a school in which enrollment has declined.
- Provide a special day to recognize and honor senior citizens.
- Issue a courtesy pass—a "Golden Age Card" as some school districts call it—for free admissions to school-sponsored events, such as athletic contests and plays and continuing education classes.
- Invite senior citizens to breakfast or lunch in school buildings.
- Arrange for use of school buses during non-school hours to take senior citizens to activities of interest to them.
- Appoint a school district staff member to act as liaison with senior citizen groups to keep open lines of communication.
- Invite senior citizens to use school libraries, gyms, swimming pools and other facilities.

School districts involved in these types of programs not only provide senior citizens with constructive, meaningful activities, they also turn many senior citizens from school critics to school supporters.

## How to Start a Program

If a school district wants to start a program involving senior citizens, the National School Public Relations Assn. offers these tips:

1. A news release is sent to local papers and carried in district publications telling of the board of education's action to establish a Golden Age Program. Residents of the school district who are 65

years or older are asked to call the School Information Office and request their cards. (Districts having a decentralized program might ask them to call the *local elementary school*—but, still, a master list should be maintained in the central office.) No credentials are required—take their word.

2. Once a name is received a welcome letter is sent from the superintendent on behalf of the board of education, along with the Golden Card for the current year. (This process must be done annually because of deaths, moving, etc.)

3. Along with the letter, enclose a calendar of school events for the year, as well as information about what they may do with the Golden Card:

✓ Attend all district athletic, musical and dramatic offerings free of charge.

✓ Attend classes in the Adult Evening School (or Community School) free of charge except for materials used in specific courses.

✓ Indicate they will be invited to other activities during the year by *local* school principals.

4. After lists are compiled, send them to all school principals along with suggestions for ways they can involve senior citizens in activities, such as:

✓ Aides—reading to students, sharing hobbies such as knitting, woodworking, slides from travels, etc.

✓ Hold special Grandparents Days or Golden Age Days.

✓ Have special events during *American Education Week*.

✓ Hold special tea or invite Golden Agers to lunch at school and tour building.

5. At Christmas time when many of the schools are having programs—send another letter inviting them to these special events and pointing out others that will be coming up.

6. If your state legislature is working on bills that will bring tax relief to senior citizens, encourage the board of education to take some definite action on the bill, to write letters to their legislators. (Send names and addresses of legislators.)

7. Put them on lists for all district publications. They may be particularly interested in information for parents of preschool children. Many are grandparents and love hearing about this!

## STUDENTS

At the other end of the chronological scale is another sometimes forgotten key communicator—the student.

For they, lest we all forget—and sometimes we do—are what education is all about.

### Best Allies Are the Majority

Jeanne Magmer, special projects coordinator for the David Douglas School District No. 40, Portland, Ore., says: "Schools are students. The story of schools is the story of students and their accomplishments. Unfortunately, the minority of students get the majority of school publicity; publicity which creates a negative public attitude toward students and schools. Our job, as school communicators and administrators, is to turn this attitude around. Our best allies are the majority of students." At David Douglas we are beginning to tap this resource to bring students to the community's attention in positive ways, including the following:

- **Through accentuating the positive with kids.** The high school principal zeroed in on the "positive kids" as his target group for improving student behavior and as a vehicle for better community relations. Every student involved in athletics in any way was invited to attend an organizational meeting—600 showed up. The group set a date for a pot-luck-rap session—400 came. The rap sessions generated a host of positive ideas for improving school behavior, school spirit and for working with the community. Student-faculty committees were formed to follow through on many of these ideas.

- **Through Career Education Work Experience Programs.** The high school offers 12 career education cluster classes. Each has a citizens advisory committee. And, through class activities in each area students are involved in the community.

Adds Magmer: "These are only a few of many activities happening at David Douglas. They don't get much publicity. But the personal contact between student and employer, between student and citizen, and between the school and the community is beginning to make a difference in the general attitude toward kids and schools in our community."

## Training in PR

In the Randolph, Mass., public schools, students are trained in several public relations and communications capacities and actively take part in the school system's public relations program as they learn. Training is provided, according to Nancy Boland, director of public relations for the school district, in:

1. Radio and television broadcasting; writing scripts for spot announcements; conducting interviews; arranging for guests to be interviewed.
2. Writing press releases for local papers.
3. Arranging for special projects to be displayed in: supermarkets, banks, stores and libraries.
4. Working on promotion campaigns; community service organizations—i.e., Heart Fund; organizing citizens and interesting citizens in school-related programs, creating original bumper stickers for projects.

## Student Advisory Council: An Important Link

In the Lincoln, Neb., schools, Supt. John Prasch has a student advisory council that is, he says, one of the school district's most important communications links to the community.

Here is how it works:

> The superintendent's student advisory council consists of representatives from each of the district's four high schools and an alternative school. Each school sends two members of its student council (frequently the president), the editor of the student newspaper and a fourth member at large. Student councils are free to select the at-large member and are encouraged to select a student who is not already in a leadership role or one who is representing

the noninvolved or antischool members of the student body. The alternative school students simply elect a representative since they are a small school and have neither a student council nor a student newspaper.

The council meets every other week, usually in the evening. Occassionally there is a breakfast meeting and usually in the early fall and again in the late spring the council is entertained at the superintendent's home.

The council operates with a minimum of procedural regulations. The director of student activities, a central office staff member, acts as executive secretary, keeping minutes, sending out agendas, etc. The superintendent chairs the meetings, which take the form of informal discussions of reports brought to the council. When votes are required, each school is allowed one vote.

The agenda includes items that students have listed as their concerns, reports from the superintendent with requests for advice or opinions, and opportunity for students to exchange reports on activities at their building. Although the council is not a working committee in the sense that it conducts programs of its own, it provides leadership for such projects as interschool visitations, registering student voters and improvement of interschool sportsmanship.

The council has been an important vehicle for a number of significant policy changes including open campus at lunch time, pass-fail grading options and changed graduation requirements. It has also exercised strong leadership in districtwide campaigns to improve attendance, to deal with student smoking, and to improve positive press relationships.

Principals are always welcome to the meetings and at least one is usually in attendance. Depending upon the agenda, other students often attend and sometimes make reports or requests. Once each year, the council meets with the board of education, at which time it reports on its activities and makes recommendations to the board as a result of its work. In some instances junior high students have been invited to participate when an agenda item seems appropriate to their concerns.

Says Prasch: "We believe the council to be an important part of the district's communication system and a good way for the central office staff to keep abreast of student concerns."

## NEW RESIDENTS

When a family with children moves into a new area, one of their first concerns is the schools.

And here, perhaps more than anywhere else, first impressions last a long, long time.

What *is* the first impression a family gets of a school district? A real estate agent that really doesn't know much about the schools, other than to assure the prospective homeowner in gushing tones that they're wonderful? A curt secretary or receptionist at the administration building who's had a rough day and really doesn't feel like being a public relations person, too? A school official who doesn't have time to answer a lot of questions? A principal who's constantly "in conference?" A teacher-neighbor who doesn't hesitate to put the knock on the school district?

Faced with these possibilities, if not realities, many school districts gear a public relations program directly toward new residents registering their children in a school district for the first time.

One of these is the Central Bucks School District in suburban Philadelphia. And one of its first efforts is what former community relations director Doris Payne calls the "personal touch." Says Payne:

> Our receptionist is very friendly and accommodating. When new residents come to the administration center to determine where their children will be assigned or to gather information about the school district, she greets them warmly. She encourages them to help themselves to school publications. Even those who come without appointments are usually ushered into the community relations office immediately where their questions are answered and specific materials are identified which pertain to the schools their children will attend.
>
> High school students are particularly apprehensive about changing to a new school so we have school newspapers, course guides and sports schedules available for parents to take along. If the students come too, we suggest that they go to their new school where they can meet the counselors and look around.
>
> Parents register their children in Central Bucks directly at the school they will attend. They usually need a map to find the school.

> That visit can be a shocking experience if the first thing the secretary does there is to thrust a fist full of forms at them and tells them to fill them out. We suggest that principals meet the new parents, answer their questions, take them on a tour of the school, and ask about the kind of program and school the children are coming from. That helps the parents feel more welcome, while it gives the school principal or counselors some insights into the new children who, although they are strangers, must be matched up with teachers and class assignments.
>
> Often new residents call the district office to determine which schools their children will attend and how to go about registering them. We refer these folks directly to the schools and send them materials about the district. We also ask the school principal to send them a welcoming letter and registration forms so that they can be completed before the first visit.
>
> Our cardinal rule is to receive people warmly and try to avoid as much red-tape as possible.

The school district works directly with realtors, too, who have identified ten questions which they are asked most frequently about the schools by their clients. The answers to those questions are printed on an inexpensive general information brochure which all real estate offices have available in large quantties. The same publication is distributed to post offices and Welcome Wagons. Adds Payne: Our relators know that they can check attendance lines or get answers to their clients' questions by calling or stopping into the community relations office. They receive immediate attention and their clients get honest answers.

But relations with new residents don't slow down once they have enrolled their youngsters in the Central Bucks schools. Payne explains:

> We try to tap parent interests early. Before they develop too many commitments to other community ventures, we want them to know we'd like their involvement in the schools. Our motto is Get Acquainted, Get Involved . . . Become a School Volunteer.
>
> Principals have new parent teas in the fall to review school procedures and policies, some have established buddy systems so that new students have a guide and friend.

# LEGISLATORS

It wasn't too long ago that school districts could, and did, leave state politics to the state politicians.

Most schools were funded primarily from local funds, and what went on in smoke filled rooms at the state capital was of little consequence back home in the local school district.

But that is not necessarily the case anymore as state legislatures and state departments of education have more and more to say about federal funds, about special education, and most importantly, about new and complex state school funding formulas rising from the dust of the increasing judicial demise of the one-time bedrock of school financing, the local real estate tax.

Tom I. Davis, special assistant for public information at the North Carolina State Dept. of Education, offers four solid reasons why local school administrators should get actively involved with legislative decision makers at the state capital:

✓ More and more states are providing more funds for public education; as local and federal funding gets less and less.

✓ The basic needs of district schools are best known by the local board and local administrators.

✓ Too many education decisions are being made by those who do not have sufficient information to make the proper decision.

✓ Since public education receives its support through and by the political system, it is imperative the administrator be a part of this system.

And Davis has some advice for school districts once they make the decision to get involved in the state political process:

✓ Be familiar with the political system in your state and district. Know who is who, how they really feel on issues; who calls the shots; the process of funding; know as much political history as possible; read political columns.

✓ The ideal is to have a staff member who can do the above for you. If not, train a staff person or you must do it yourself.

✓ To be able to translate priorities to the funding decision makers, wherever they might be.

✓ Identify "friends of education" and seek their advice.

As for the politicians themselves, Davis says:

✓ Know them on a first name basis.

✓ Schedule or make frequent visits, but don't bore them.

✓ Utilize your publics to communicate agreed needs—letters, visits, forums, editorials, etc.

✓ Have decision makers visit programs in schools

✓ Keep them informed.

But there are pitfalls, Davis warns. His advice:

✓ Avoid getting involved in partisan politics.

✓ Avoid philosophical tangles with unions, associations and special interest groups.

✓ Avoid "overkill" in working with legislative decision makers.

✓ Avoid being misunderstood. Be clear, concise, to the point.

## Guidelines for Legislative Liaison

Helen J. Williams, public information consultant for The Independent School District of Boise City, Bosie, Idaho, lists the following step-by-step advice for improving communication with district legislators:

1. Make certain legislators are included on the district's mailing list so they are appraised of school issues.
2. Before the legislative session, invite State legislators in your school district to a breakfast or luncheon get-together with board members and selected administrators. Give them background information on the district, and discuss educational issues relating to legislation (i.e., state funding, transportation costs). Let them know how it will affect the district.

3. As soon as the legislature convenes, prepare a compact, pocket-sized legislative compendium stating the district's stand on specific bills. Update this regularly so as legislation is changed and new bills are introduced, they are included. Be sure to list names, titles, and phone numbers of administrators and board members so they can call if there is a question.

4. Continue to meet with legislators every week or two for breakfast or lunch, whichever is most convenient, during the session for an exchange of views.

5. Send a school district calendar of events to all state legislative families—musical productions, gymnastic shows, etc. Invite them to attend.

6. Don't forget to include legislators in other things going on during the course of the school year. Invite them to conferences and discussions, school dedications, budget hearings, etc.

7. Make sure that legislators know and respect their school district source.

The two primary goals of good legislative liaison, Williams says, are "to keep elected officials well-informed about educational programs and needs, and to establish a comfortable working relationship between them and school administrators.

# CRISIS PLANNING

"The most critical few hours in the history of the Parkway (Mo.) School District could face us 10 minutes from now . . . or tomorrow . . . or next week . . . because no school system is immune to an emergency or disaster having an immediate and negative physical or mental effect on its students, teachers and/or staff" says the introduction to an Emergency and Disaster Plan Check List for the district prepared by district director of school-community relations.

"To help minimize the risk of major oversights or other errors while operating in the glare of publicity under stress conditions," the check list continues, "the following specific guidelines should be followed when disturbances, accidents or catastrophes occur which affect groups of students, teachers or staff. The immediate purpose of the plan is to get the facts to families, friends and the general public—and to the proper authorities—as quickly as they are known and as often as new facts become known."

The checklist, which is prepared and distributed to all schools principals and administrators each fall, includes the following guidelines:

- Immediately notify the appropriate agency or agencies such as police, fire, ambulance, hospital or health authorities.
- Insure the safety of all student, staff and other persons in the immediate area.
- Refer all news media representatives to the superintendent's office or school-community relations office
- In the event of a major disaster or crisis, a press room will be set up in the district administration center equipped with desks, chairs, typewriters, telephones, etc.
- Additional operators will be provided to handle calls coming to the district switchboard.
- It is the responsibility of the superintendent's office to notify district attorneys and insurance agents.

## Chapter 6.

# Tools of Communication

Now, having established a public information program and surveyed your publics for their information needs, you must make some decisions on how to communicate with these audiences. Will it be a monthly newsletter, an annual report, a telephone hot line, a series of "town meetings", radio announcements, special presentations on television or a slide-tape presentation? Each of these is suited for answering particular communication needs.

Need room for detail when explaining the school budget? Print media work best here. Are schools closing because of heavy snow? Radio announcements will work best here. Do parents need to know the dates schools are open, when vacations are, the monthly date of the PTA meeting? The school calendar is perfect for this. Do you have a special education program where a visual presentation would best convey the enthusiasm of teachers and students alike? A TV feature or video-tape presentation could be the key.

A school communicator has a wide range of media to choose from and needs to be familiar with them all. One quick guideline—electronic media are generally best suited for information which must be conveyed quickly; print is usually more effective when you need details to present your case.

This chapter deals with guidelines for using each.

## THE NEWSLETTER

If you can picture a helicopter without a rotor, you might be able to picture a school communication program without a newsletter.

It's reasonably certain that both of them will wind up in flames.

There is little doubt that a school district that relies on the media or on word of mouth to spread positive news about the schools is in deep trouble. The very nature of both these modes of communication is to do exactly the opposite.

Thus, a school district has to tell its own **positive** story, and the best way to do it—by far—is in print.

That's not to say a school district newsletter, annual report or other printed communication should be nothing more than a propaganda sheet. That's almost as bad as nothing at all. But an honest, factual, attractive and inexpensive newsletter is essential in the telling of the school district story.

Ideally, such a newsletter should be sent to every resident in the district. But when the size of the district prohibits such distribution, it must at least go to employes, parents, and community leaders—people who must know the positive aspects of public education today if public confidence is to be restored.

And by newsletter it is meant a **letter with news** about what is going on in the schools.

For far too many years, the prototype school district newsletter consisted of a small, four-page publication on slick paper, the most prominent part of which was a page-one "Message from the Superintendent," which featured some high sounding, dollar-and-a-quarter words of education philosophy, coupled with a reminder that this was the best school district in the universe.

Rarely was there any substantive news involved, and more often than not the prose—or at least the part of it that could be understood—was pure puff.

Then much of the remainder of the issue was taken up with notices of administrative promotions, awards given to and publications generated primarily by administrators, and maybe, just maybe, if there was room, a little news about what was happening in the schools—or classroom.

Thankfully, the format of many school district newspapers has changed dramatically in the past ten years.

The changes have involved format. Many newsletters are now breezy, informative tabloids, with plenty of features about what's going on in the schools. They have involved content—more pictures, more white space, more eye-catching layouts. And they have changed, in the style of the writing.

Perhaps no more formidable barrier to better communication by educators has ever existed than the language of "pedagese," the special hieroglyphics of the pedagogue; the traditional, formal language of educational treatises since dawn of the doctoral thesis.

Thankfully, pedagese is in the process of joining McGuffey's Eclectic Readers in the archives of educational history—and school district communications are beginning to reflect the change.

## Making a Change

Perhaps a story from the Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools reported in *IT STARTS in the Classroom*, October 1977, best emphasizes the need for such a change, and at the same time gives some solid rules of clear writing for school district administrators, teachers, writers and editors throughout the country:

> It all started with an innocent request. At the end of an administrative workshop for the Montgomery County schools, information director Kenneth Muir invited the participants to pass along suggestions for improving communication.
>
> There was, in fact, only one answer, but it sparked a movement in the school system that may have lasting repercussions. It took the form of an anonymous letter (signed "The Curmudgeon") that criticized the superintendent's "tendency to use pedantic prose."
>
> "Often the superintendent's ideas are drowned by his words," the letter said. "If he wanted to tell us that when the cat's away, the mice will play, it would come out something like this: 'Rodents, in the absence of their feline adversaries, are prone to divert themselves.' What comes across is, 'I don't want to really communicate with you.'" The letter suggested that before a memo goes out, someone in the information office should "translate" it into concise English. "If after the obfuscation has been wiped away there's a blank piece of paper," the letter concluded, "that says something, too."
>
> A note like this could have blown the roof off of the administration building, but Muir saw it as a chance to promote one of his pet crusades. And the superintendent went along enthusiastically. A few days later, a memorandum from Bernardo went out to the administration staff, quoting "The Curmudgeon's" letter, and admitting that "my written and spoken language is frequently both formal and pedantic." Although a 20-year custom of using language that is too formal might be hard to break, Bernardo went on, "my habit patterns may stand in the way of good communications." So, he promised, "I'm going to try to do better."

Bernardo noted that he wasn't the only offender. "My impression from reading hundreds of staff memoranda is that this problem is of epidemic proportions." To those who think that this style is what the superintendent wants, he said, "let me take this opportunity to assure you that it is not. Rather, I urge you to join me in an effort to frame our thoughts in the most clear and concise language possible."

## Guidelines for Clarity

Accompanying this memorandum was a collection of 7 guidelines for clear writing, developed by publications director Donald Hymes (with a nod to *Writer's Digest*), which Bernardo suggested his staff keep "close at hand."

Good writing is good writing no matter what the subject is, the attachment began, and good writers do not change their styles whether they're writing home or composing a treatise on education. Whether you're composing a memo to your staff or a report to the board of education, the purpose of the document is to communicate, not to demonstrate your intellect or eloquence. So every time you write anything, look it over before you send it on.

Keep in mind the following guidelines:

- **Prefer the plain word to the fancy.** Telling a mother that her child is a "marginal underachiever" may make you sound erudite, but she'd know better what you meant if you said the child was "a little slow.".

- **Prefer the familiar word to the unfamiliar.** If you need a thesaurus to find a word, don't use it. It should be one that comes naturally. And, most important, it should be familiar to the receiver of the message, not just to the writer. Know your audience and don't overestimate either their reading level or their desire to plow through your prose.

- **Never use a long word when a short one will do as well.** "Assistance" means "help"; "indicate" means "say"; "innovative" means "new". Words of three syllables or more raise your writing's *Fog Index* and hide your meaning.

- **Never use two (or more) words when one will do as well.** "Within the near future" means "soon"; "due to the fact that" means "because". Take the common phrase "in order to." Knock off the first two words and ask yourself if it changes the meaning at all. Look at all your phrases the same way.

- **Master the simple declarative sentence and use it—often.** A sentence, by definition, has a subject, a verb and an object. Too often, however, sentences have too many of each—guaranteeing that the reader will get lost in the maze.

- **Cut out needless words, sentences and paragraphs.** If it doesn't add to your meaning, you don't need it. Some people think that the longer the message, the more important it seems. Actually, it often works the other way around. Long paragraphs intimidate readers, and unnecessary words and phrases can muddle the meaning.

- **Revise and rewrite. Improvement is always possible.** There isn't a writer alive who won't benefit from a little editing, starting with his or her own pencil.

## How to Plan—or Evaluate—Your Newsletter

When planning a newsletter—or analyzing an existing one, the wise editor keeps the following essentials in mind:

**Content:**

- A good newsletter is written with the reader in mind. It contains information the parent wants to know, not just what the administrator wants to say. Its emphasis is on **news.** It tells what's going on in the school—including real or potential problems and the steps being taken to solve them.

- It can contain articles written by teachers and students describing interesting and unusual classroom activities, but the editor must be cold-blooded enough to ensure that these articles say something, and say it well.

**Writing style:**

- Write it from people to people, not institution to institution. Use personal pronouns where they apply. It's "our school" and "our children."

- Write in a conversational tone. Try reading it aloud. If you can't do it without twisting your tongue or running out of breath, rewrite it.

- Keep sentences uncomplicated and short.

- Avoid educational jargon. Many parents don't understand what "cognitive" and "affective" mean, and they probably think that "interdisciplinary" has something to do with conduct. Use plain English.

- Use active verbs. Passive writing is guaranteed to be dull.

- Avoid statements or statistics you haven't explained adequately. Parents have a habit of transforming vagueness and confusion into hostility. And the same goes for superlatives, or generalizations you can't support.

**Format:**

- Make it attractive and readable. Paragraphs should be short and separated by white space. Use some typographical device—underlining, large display type, or at least capitals—like a headline to break up the grayness of the page and to point up new stories. Without these, the page will look forbidding and will discourage readership.

- Artwork can be used effectively, no matter what production technique is employed. Photographs, clip art, and even student drawings can dress up the newsletter. One warning: *no* art at all is better than *bad* art. Childish lettering and sketches may be all right if they illustrate children's work, but not if they represent the work of adult editors. The same goes for photographs. If all you have are tiny, muddy snapshots, forget them.

**Production:**

- There is a production technique to fit every budget. Those schools that can afford offset printing, or those that can call on their own vocational print shop or one nearby, are way ahead. But mimeograph stencils are certainly acceptable, especially with the many types of style and stencil devices available for lettering and drawing. Electronic stencil-cutters can turn typewritten copy and line art—and good photographs—into a publication that almost looks printed. And even the lowly spirit duplicator can turn out a better-than-adequate newsletter, especially now that it can produce colors other than faded purple.

- Again a warning: sloppiness can ruin your product no matter what technique you use. A carefully produced ditto newsletter is preferred to a messy, smeared printed one.

**How Do You Know If It's Good?**

- Ask your readers. The best way to find out how your newsletter is being received is to give your readers the chance to tell you. Solicit mailed comments, perhaps with a little questionnaire form in one issue a year. Ask for comments at a PTA meeting. Make random phone calls to parents. Don't do your work in a vacuum.

- Feedback, both good and bad, may come without solicitation, too. So make sure the name and address and telephone number of the editor is prominently displayed on the newsletter.

## The Story's There

Research has shown that the most read stories in a school newsletter are stories about students. There isn't anything more exciting than capturing a child who is in the process of learning. What this boils down to is that you have at your disposal a natural actor in a child, an expected result in the learning process and a guaranteed interest in your education program because your readers are investing hard-earned dollars in it. Some examples of feature stories:

- Students in a vocational education program build a house during the year for sale upon completion.

- Elementary school students learn about genetics by raising white mice.

- Students in government studies classes get first-hand experience by taking over city management jobs for a day.

These examples are just a sampling of the hundreds of stories found in school buildings everyday. All you need to remember is that as long as school is in session there is learning and where there is learning there is a story.

Yet, the problem remains of how to uncover these stories that take place daily throughout the school district.

One solution is a "tip" sheet that can be sent monthly to each teacher in each school, asking them to submit story ideas for the district's newsletter. And you might name a newsletter representative in each school whose job it is to remind teachers to turn in their tip sheets and to follow through on story ideas.

The tip sheet might look like this:

TIP SHEET
Oxford Public Schools
Public Information Department

There will be a news story happening in my classroom . . .
Who is involved:
What is it about:
When will it happen:
Where will it happen:
How will it be carried out:

Is there anything unusual or unique about this story:

From ________________________________________

School ________________________________________

Grade ________________________________________

Room # ____________

Leave completed form with your building principal.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Jane Smith
Public Information

## Getting it Printed

Working with your printer is another important aspect of producing a quality school district newslatter. The following guidelines will smooth the way and save dollars:

1. **Know your printer.** Even if you have to choose him through open bidding, assure yourself that he is capable of producing the kind of

material you envision. If you're not familiar with his work, insist on samples being submitted with the bid.

2. **Know the capabilities of his equipment.** If his presses have a sheet capacity of 8½ × 11, or 17 × 22½, a 6 × 9 booklet can cost you almost twice as much as one that is 5½ × 8½. Understand that on a 17½ × 22½ inch sheet, he can print 16 pages of 5½ × 8½. If you ask him to do a 20-page book, you will be paying quite a premium for those extra four pages, because they require extra cutting, folding and collating. For the same reason, you may find that a 60-page brochure will cost more than a 64-pager. Know what kind of bindery equipment he has. If he has to job it out because you insist on a process he doesn't do in-house, you will have to pay the printer a profit on top of what he pays the bindery. And if he has only one-color presses, a two-color job requires two press runs, and will cost quite a bit more than at a printer who has two-color presses.

3. **Write specifications carefully and clearly.** They should cover these items:
   a. Weight, color and quality of paper for text and cover. Name the exact stock you want, or note "or equivalent." Insist on samples to be submitted with bid.
   b. Page size, number of pages and quantity of run. If type hasn't been set and you're not sure how many pages there will be, estimate and ask for prices by 4-page or 8-page sections above and below your estimate. If there is a possibility you may need more copies than you specify, ask for cost of additional hundreds or thousands.
   c. Number of ink colors, specifying if other than black and where color is to be—on all pages, certain pages, etc. If you can restrict your second color to one section, you can save money and still have a colorful looking book.
   d. Amount of copy and heads and what type face and head styles you want. Use the type faces the printer has, because if he jobs out the typesetting you pay more.
   e. Time requirements. Specify when you will deliver the copy and how long he has to complete the job. How long will you be allowed to keep the proofs?
   f. Number of halftones (photographs), duotones or color separations, and where they will be used.
   g. Other services to be provided by the printer, such as artwork, composition, addressing, mailing, packaging or slip-sheeting and delivery.

h. Your cost if you make changes after the blueline proof.
i. Anything unusual, such as die-cuts, embossing or foldouts.

**Failing to include any of these items in your bid or your contract can cost you a disproportionate premium if you add them in midstream.

4. **Make sure your copy is neat and your instructions are clear.** Changes required because the printer didn't understand what you wanted can be billed to you as author's corrections. If you want a picture cropped a certain way, do it yourself with a grease pencil in the margin. Don't assume he will do anything automatically. Put it in writing.

5. **Prepare a dummy.** Don't make the printer guess what you want to go where.

6. **Check proofs carefully and quickly.** Have more than one person read them. Resist the temptation to edit it again at this stage, because it will cost you.

7. **Insist that the printer stick to his promises only if you have stuck to yours.**

## ANNUAL REPORT

### In Print

Another major publication that helps tell the positive school district story to the community is the annual report. Although annual reports appear to be dying out in some districts, they are being mandated by law in several states—not only at the district level, but for each school building.

But here, once again, there is a fine line between factual, objective reporting on the accomplishments of a school, district, and the publishing of a document designed primarily to assure the reader that everything is wonderful within the school district when, in fact, it is not.

An annual report should be positive. It should list school district accomplishments. It should proudly promote the district's outstanding features. But it should never attempt to cover up weaknesses or to pretend that they do not exist.

A good annual report—one that seeks the credibility of its community—promotes the good, admits the bad and tells what the school district is going to do to turn the latter into the former.

The format of the annual report varies widely. In some communities, the report is a special publication that stands by itself. In others it is an insert in a local newspaper or in the school district's annual calendar or in its community newsletter.

The first point to be considered, though, when considering an annual report, is its cost.

A school district that is having *financial problems*—and most are—can be criticized severely, and rightfully so, for putting out an elaborate **and** expensive annual report at the same time it is closing schools, laying off teachers and cutting back on the athletic program.

For that matter, the days of the slick, four-color, big corporation look-alike annual report for *any* school district are long past, unless every penny of the production comes from a source other than school district funds.

But regardless of the format used, or the cost involved, the best "print" annual reports, according to Albert E. Holliday, editor and publisher of the *Journal of Educational Communication,* share most of the following characteristics:

- **An overall theme.** This could be "the people of your district" with a review of each department and school and how it operates. The theme could review an advisory committee's report on recommended curriculum changes and how the board hopes to implement them.
- **A special section dealing with the budget**—how much is needed for this year, with costs broken down into major categories.
- **Lots of photos**—to personalize the report for readers.
- **Highlights of the past year** are provided for background, and **special goals** (of the board, superintendent or individual schools and departments) **for the next 12 months** are stated. These help focus people's attention on priority issues which may change year to year.
- **Results of achievement tests or assessment**—detailed and explained with special reference to major outcomes or findings. Plans to correct weaknesses should be discussed.
- **Problem areas of the system**—dealt with openly and fairly. If the system had to suffer through an employe strike or violence in a school, the issue is met head-on and what steps have or will be taken to avoid difficulty in the future are explained.

- **Wide distribution** throughout the community via the mail, local schools, realtors, visitors' centers, chambers of commerce and other means.

Veda M. Williams, public information assistant for the Richardson (Tex.) Independent School District, adds the following tips:

1. **Time is of the essence.** Hair styles change. Clothing styles change. Even the ways educators use to teach are changing. Deliberately plan your pictures to capture the excitement and motion of learning so that they will have a "timelessness" to them, if possible. Avoid the time element that can enter into your story.
2. **Get help.** Corporations often hire an advertising firm to help them do their annual report. A volunteer photographer, or a student photographer, can help tremendously. Other educators can give you suggestions for pictures and for story, or copy block, ideas. Have someone whose opinions you value be your sounding board. Maybe you have a big taxpayer corporation in your district. Their PR department might help you.
3. **Color costs.** Each extra color you use in your layout means an extra press run. Labor and production costs zoom. A printer you trust can give you invaluable advice about the proper use of extra color.
4. **Read proof and copy, again and again.** Different copy readers and different proofreaders at different stages of production will help you find the small errors that always seem to crop up. Find good ones and use them.

## Using Television

Because television has become the means identified by most adults as their primary source of information, it should be considered as the means for presenting the school district's annual report to a wide public. John Cone, executive director of the South Carolina Schools Boards Assn. and formerly director of information for the Charleston, S.C., Public Schools, says it has clear advantages.

1. The cost of using television is comparable to buying newspaper space. In a medium-sized market one might expect to pay $600 for a thirty-minute prime time program reaching 60,000 households.

2. Those who can not or will not read your annual report can and probably will sit and listen to an attractive televised report. Some will tune out the station but this can be minimized with the right kind of advance publicity and an entertaining format.

3. Thousands of citizens have an opportunity to see and hear the superintendent as he presents the "state of the schools" address.

4. The viewer can look at a chart and have it explained. Nothing is more frustrating than seeing a graph in the written annual report and not being able to understand what it means.

5. Through the use of film shot on site the viewers can actually see what is happening in the schools. They are reminded of how small a five-year old child is. They can see vocational students operating a printing press. They may see for the first time how crowded a classroom can be. They can see enthusiastic teachers and motivated students.

6. Others can appear live on the air and question what the school spokesperson has said. A news team can lend credibility to the report by interviewing the superintendent on the air. This technique may be an immediate answer to questions which naturally arise in the minds of the viewers as the report progresses.

7. The programs can be taped, stored and reviewed year after year. A sense of continuity develops when the spokesperson can say "Here is what we promised you three years ago and here is what we have done." When excerpts of previous reports are used it lends an atmosphere of long-range planning and commitment to openness and candor.

## GUIDES FOR PLANNING

When planning to broadcast an annual report, Cone says, there are some general caution signs to be observed:

- Don't pay to have the report published in the paper and then expect the television stations to donate air time.

- Check the rating books to see which station or stations should broadcast your report, how much you should pay them and when your audience is watching.

- Don't ask several stations for a simul-cast. They will probably refuse and even if they agree, robbing the TV audience of a choice of programs may make your viewers angry.

- Make sure anyone involved in taping the program understands that its content is confidential. A leak to the news staff can destroy your chances for a good audience.

- Plan the release of the information so that the news coverage works for and not against your program.

- Make certain that you have some important, hard news to release through the annual report.

## FORMAT FOR A 30-MINUTE REPORT

In Charleston the program is called "Operation Bootstrap." It has been closely tied for the last four years to the goals of the board of trustees. It is also tied to the plan for progress referred to throughout the year. Every major program in the district, from kindergarten to career ed, is a part of "Operation Bootstrap".

In the first five minutes of the program the superintendent explains the reason for appearing before the public. He emphasizes the importance of citizen understanding, support and involvement. The only visual used in this segment is a flashback to the first year at which time he promised to return every year and report the test results, good or bad.

The superintendent then takes about seven minutes explaining the test scores. In this segment he uses a set of charts which he explains in the simplest terms possible.

The next eight minutes or so are devoted to the school program. The superintendent narrates a piece of film actually shot in the school setting. In reality the film segment was narrated earlier so the superintendent can rest during this portion of the taping session.

In the final segment the superintendent introduces the top newsperson from each of the three stations. The four of them spend the remaining seven or eight minutes with informal questions and answers.

This format may be varied many ways but some elements seem fundamental. The use of independent, impartial news commentators is important. It helps avoid the stigma of a "whitewash" and adds to the sense of openness. The use of film actually showing what the district is doing is essential. It reminds viewers of what public education is all about. It puts children on the stage where they belong in an annual report.

# SCHOOL DISTRICT CALENDAR

Still another communication tool is the annual school district calendar. A wall calendar for the entire school year can be many things to many people:

- It can remind parents, month by month, of important dates—board meetings, PTA meetings, school visitations, sports schedules, report card dates, etc.

- It can give a school district good year-round exposure; hanging in thousands of homes throughout the district, containing important dates and general information about the schools, it reminds parents, day-by-day that the school district cares to communicate with them.

- It can be a reference guide to parents for school district rules, regulations and policies.

Calendars are relatively expensive to print, and time-consuming to plan and to put together, but a good one can well be worth the effort by reaping communication rewards from the community.

Most communication experts agree that good school district calendars:

- Include plenty of photos of staff and students.

- Provide a personal planning device—users can pen their own events in data blocks.

- Review important board policies and administrative regulations—when kids can enter school, attendance and behavior requirements, bus regulations, textbook selection procedures, etc.

- Contain valuable resource information about areas such as the grading system, scholarship opportunities, special services, lunch program, board meetings and district characteristics.

- Have people references such as school administrators, PTA leaders, board members, municipal officials and others. Names, titles, phone numbers and addresses are provided so one can contact them easily.

- Are attractive enough to hang on the kitchen or family room wall.

## Specialized Publications

Besides newsletters, annual reports and calendars, school districts can use any number of specialized communication tools. Among the most effective are:

### Board Meeting Brochures

First-time visitors to a board meeting will find this brochure of value. They can learn how the board operates and how a citizen can pose questions or suggestions to the board. Photos of board members and district officials, along with brief biographies, personalize the system's leaders.

This brochure is usually supplemented by an agenda of proposed business, with brief statements of background for each item. Visitors then know what is being discussed or voted upon as the meeting progresses.

### Speakers Bureau Brochures

This brochure is used to stimulate community clubs and associations to schedule a school official to speak before their membership. The brochure contains a list of possible speakers and titles of presentations they have prepared. Details as to how a speaker can be obtained are included. Copies are sent every year to presidents and program chairmen of community groups. The brochure should be updated annually.

### Pre-School Orientation

Parents of children about to enter kindergarten or first grade usually have many questions about the school's instructional program in the early grades. This kind of publication (tied with an in-school orientation visit) should help prepare parents and their youngsters for the new experience. Details are provided about daily activities, the instructional program, transportation, health factors, reporting of pupil progress, joint teacher-parent programs, etc.

### 'Basic Facts' Booklets

Many large districts find a single reference booklet covering all aspects of the system of value to staff members and interested citizens. Content may cover personnel, pupils, finances, facilities, course offerings, special projects and community information. Copies should be provided to community leaders and prospective staff members. Such a booklet can also save research time for staff members who answer questions from the public.

### Directories

Staff members as well as interested citizens appreciate a well-indexed, district directory of employes, schools, facilities and community and governmental agencies. Content may include maps and personnel directories by departments and schools. Officers of educational associations and committees can be listed.

## THE 'HOT LINE'

But there are tools other than the printed word to get the school story across to the community. And one of the best is the telephone newsline. Some school districts call it a "hot line" or an "informaphone" or a "telecom," service. But whatever it's called, it is usually effective in getting up-to-date messages out to the community.

A good, model newsline can be found in the Jefferson County (Colo.) Public Schools, where more than 1,000 calls a week are logged from interested citizens in the 112-school, 78,000-student district.

Gary Marx, the school district's director of information, offers hints on how to make the newsline work:

- Keep the recorded messages to 90 seconds or less. About 80 percent of the messages are 60 seconds or less.
- Attempt to include only news of areawide or districtwide interest, although a smaller district could consider including local school items.
- Include agendas of area advisory committees, agendas of board of education meetings, and brief summaries of news releases issued from the central office, as appropriate.
- Change the message two to three times each week.
- Prerecord tapes announcing school closings in bad weather which can be put on early (5-6 a.m.) to notify area news media.
- Consider carrying the daily elementary school lunch menus. The volume of calls picked up sharply when we started carrying the menus.

## TIPS for a 'Newsline'

The 20 Do's and Don'ts listed below will help you plan and implement a telephone newsline service.

1. *Investigate the possibility of getting a special telephone number*—perhaps one with a special significance—perhaps one with your district's initials as an acronym.

2. *Install an outside telephone line exclusively for your newsline.* If callers have to go through the switchboard, they won't be able to get news at night or when you're using the phone during the day.

3. *Write for the ear* rather than the eye when preparing newsline messages. People have to be able to tell immediately what you're talking about. Use short sentences and an informal, conversational style. Listen to radio news announcers for tips on phrasing introductions and on presentation.

4. *Practice* to get the hang of timing, inflection, expression. And do read over the message before you record it. Very few people are poised enough to get by with recording an unrehearsed message.

5. *Listen to each message before you release it to the public.* Something that looked fine on paper may not sound good.

6. *Avoid making your pitch too slick.* The hard-sell, "we're-the-greatest" approach is even more grating on the telephone than on paper.

7. *Do worry about the quality of reproduction.* A poor, fuzzy or scratchy recording that's hard to decipher will turn off most callers. If the quality of your recording is poor, tell the company that supplied it. Telephone your newsline yourself periodically to double check on the quality.

8. *Devise a standard opening and closing* so people can readily identify what they're listening to. (You'll get wrong numbers, just like any other phone line does.)

9. *Avoid misunderstanding,* especially on events reported in advance, by using the designation "on Tuesday" rather than "tomorrow" or "day after tomorrow."

10. *Notify the news media of your service.* Perhaps a local radio station may be interested in taping the message for daily broadcast. The newsline is a handy way of keeping the media informed of district happenings.

11. *Conduct a massive publicity campaign* when you initiate your newsline service, but don't stop there. People need to be reminded constantly if you want them to call regularly. Plug the newsline in every district publication or other regular information service.

12. *Meet your schedule.* If you promise daily news, you're obligated to come through. You'll quickly lose listeners if you aren't dependable.

13. *Believe there is enough news to provide it daily.* You don't need a new topic every day. Update a previous story. Explain the whys behind your school policies and procedures. Announce upcoming school events. List the entire calendar of events for a week or month. Do a mini-feature on something especially interesting, unusual or successful going on in a classroom. Provide some statistics about your district, such as total number of students or staff members, numbers of new teachers, enrollment trends, even the number of school buses and students who ride them.

14. *Make every effort to cover hard news* before you use a feature or filler. News should be your number one priority.

15. *Cover your problems or crises as soon as they occur.* If you don't know the whole story, say so and comment on what you do know. Otherwise, you've lost probably the most important asset of your newsline—immediacy.

16. *Cover the results of school board meetings and negotiating sessions as soon as possible.* You can record board meeting results before you go home after the meeting, providing early-rising staff members with a 6 a.m. report. That's service.

17. *Repeat a timeless or especially important message,* if necessary, but reword it. Use a new introduction or add new information.

18. *Retract or correct when you make a mistake.* It lends substantially to your credibility—to say nothing of protecting you from lawsuits.

19. *Keep your messages short.* Most people can't take listening to something prerecorded for more than three minutes.

20. *Keep a calendar to suggest topics for future messages.* Forthcoming meetings, school holidays, and other seasonal topics are naturals—such as when the budget process begins, when negotiating sessions begin, when test scores come out. And do anticipate devoting one day's message to answering the questions people ask each year: "Do we have a holiday for Columbus Day?" "Do we get out early at Thanksgiving?"

## AUDIOVISUALS

Another tool is the audiovisual presentation, whether it be slides, a slide-tape, or film.

The best of the three is the slide-tape presentation, preferably done automatically, with music and voice over an attractive display of slides, flashing or fading on and off on anywhere up to a half dozen screens.

There usually is nothing deadlier than the one-person, one-slide-at-a-time, monotone description approach. Audiences more than likely will be restless at best as they wait for the ordeal to end, or, at worst, downright insulted.

A well-done 16-mm film, on the other hand, makes a fine audiovisual. But the problem is expense. A good 16-mm color film costs an absolute minimum of $1,000 a minute to produce, and that's if you can get a free lance producer who needs the work. Professional filmmaking companies start somewhere in the vicinity of $2,000 a minute and go up.

Yet, a good, even dazzling 15-minute slide-tape, using slides that most school districts already have, can be put together for a few hundred dollars.

It's important, however, to get someone who is experienced with the whole process and creative enough to blend words, music and slides into a colorful, fast-moving and informative presentation.

Most school districts have many such persons right in the ranks of their teachers and administrators; persons who would be flattered to be asked to put their audiovisual skills to work to help the school district tell its story to the community.

Give them a script (prepared by the school information officer or someone else with writing talent) a couple of hundred slides of kids and a few charts and graphs, and you will be amazed at what kind of high-impact community message they can put together.

The staff of the Eastman Kodak Education Center at Riverwood, Rochester, N.Y., presents the following tips for putting together a good audiovisual presentation.

**Know your objective:**

- **Be audience-oriented,** not subject-oriented, when planning your material. Make a careful analysis of what you are trying to accomplish with the presentation.

- **Decide what you want the audience to do after** seeing the presentation. Do you want to change its attitudes? Do you want action on the part of the audience? Is the presentation solely informational? What degree of increase in audience understanding is required?

**Audience Analysis:**

- **Size.** If a large group, you need a wider variety of examples, a broader, less intimate approach.

- **Occupations and education.** Age and sex. Is it a voluntary or captive audience?

- **Plan your material.** Don't be too elementary, but don't talk over your audience's heads. How much material is appropriate to this kind of group? What are the best ways to get it across, considering the components of this specific audience?

- **Audience attitude.** Is it likely to be hostile or supportive? Does it have anxieties about your subject? What are these anxieties? What beliefs do they already have about your subject? Are these accurate or misinformed? Do they have prejudices which must be dispelled?

**Materials Preparation:**

- **File cards.** Put all ideas on file cards, one idea per card, using sketchy words and trying to think visually. Don't worry about the numbers of cards. Edit, delete and organize into one kind of order, either chronologically, by subject, or whatever suits your material best.

- **Prepare your verbal presentation,** following the file card ideas you have decided to use. Time your presentation and adjust it to desired length. Allow time for questions and answers. Look for ways to get occasional audience response (like raising hands to a question).

- **Prepare visuals to go with your file card ideas.** 2 × 2 slides are good. Also movie sequences. Frequently let the visual tell the story without spoken words. Sometimes put words on slides, especially to indicate lead ideas or summary points. Use symbols, charts, diagrams, interspersed with slides. Variety is very effective.

- **Avoid verbal and visual detail,** long captions and extraneous detail.

- **Don't explain the obvious.** Let the charts and graphs speak for themselves.

- Make each visual tell an important story; don't use more than you need. Mix long shots, medium shots and closeups. Use closeups sparingly for impact.

- **Avoid bars and lines in graphs.** Instead, use pictorial comparisons. Good visuals don't require great art ability. Originality and creativity are important.

- **Lettering and gimmicks:** titles can be objects (pencils, for instance) formed into letters, then take a slide of it.

**Presentation:**

- **Use your visuals for cues** rather than depending on a written sheet. You can, if you practice.

- **Study your environment carefully.** Think about screen size and location; lighting control; sound system; ventilation. All of these can affect the mood of the audience.

- **Rehearse** the complete presentation, with visuals. Aim for a conversational tone of voice. Don't memorize the material word for word.

- **Time the presentation.** Remember there are more famous short speeches than long ones.

- **Check the projection equipment** and have an extra bulb on hand.

- **Arrive early** to be sure everything works and to give you time to relax.

## Chapter 7.

# Working With the Media

An education reporter from an urban daily newspaper went to work for the city's school district as an information specialist.

After only a couple of months on the job, he called his former boss—an editor to whom he had been close—to complain, gently, of the negative coverage the paper had been giving the school district.

"Listen," the editor said. "the people you work for are educators. They're supposed to be educating kids. They're paid by the taxpayers to educate kids. When they do, that's not news. That's what they're paid to do. It's when they don't that it's news."

That, unfortunately—or fortunately, if you're looking at it from the perspective of the media—is a true story.

It is the primary reason why, in far too many instances, the educator and the reporter get along like the cobra and the mongoose. And it is the bane of the existence of the school PR specialist.

It is reasonably safe to say that more school PR people have been fired for failing to "control" the media than for any other single reason. Most school boards and many superintendents can't understand why they are crucified by the media when things go wrong, and all but ignored when things go right. Many blame it on their media specialist.

It's usually an unfair rap. But in many, many cases, the school PR specialist could have done a lot more to assure fair, objective coverage of the school news. Controlling the press is out of the question. But working with it to assure accurate, objective coverage of both the good and the bad is what school-media relations should be all about.

To be effective, the school PR specialist must fully understand the media. He or she must be ready to accept the fact that, generally, bad news, rather than good, sells newspapers and determines the ratings of radio and TV newscasts. Certainly, features about kids and animals and some positive news are part of that package. But the simple fact is that media that do not report violence, expose corruption, crusade for the taxpayer, hold a magnifying glass to the government fishbowl and tell where things went wrong usually go out of business.

A paper in a small town, hearing constantly from critics that it reported such negative news, decided on an experiment. It would print only positive news. So, week after week, it assured townspeople that everything was rosy with the town government, the schools, the police department and with just about everything else around.

It wasn't long before the townspeople—some of them the same people who had complained about negative coverage in the first place—got together a committee, marched on the office of the paper's publisher and demanded to know why the paper was covering up; why it was failing in its mission as the community watchdog; why it was failing to report the untoward things that were surely happening around town.

That, too, is a true story, and, in essence, it symbolizes the plight of school PR: most people who buy newspapers and listen to the radio and watch TV expect the media to report what is going wrong.

And they realize that without the media, Watergate might still just be an apartment complex in Washington, D.C.; Vietnam might still be an unending war in a rice paddy halfway around the world, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn might still be a prisoner in a Russian jail.

Likewise, someone must keep a close watch on the tax dollar, be it spent for bombs or butter or the education of a child. And like it or not, education, as a major tax-consuming branch of government, is suspect by the taxpayers and by the media they support.

So it's up to the school board, and the superintendent and the school PR specialist to allay that suspicion by running an open, honest, out-in-the-sunshine operation for all the world, including the media, to see.

## Choose Your Battles

The school board that mistakenly wars with the media, even though sometimes it may be justified—because the media can have its slants, its prejudices, its vendettas, too—becomes the antagonist, the opponent of First Amendment rights, the government bureaucracy trying to impede this society's primary watchdog, the media.

School districts contemplating such a tactic should remember the words of the anonymous sage who said he made it a practice never to fight with someone who bought ink by the barrels and paper by the ton.

It's a losing battle right from the start.

The answer, then, is to recognize the ''givens'' of working with the media—startling news sells newspapers and boosts broadcast ratings, and positive news isn't startling—and work within this context for balanced coverage of school news.

For it is also another given—all too often overlooked by school districts—that most media, if treated frankly and honestly when test scores go down, or a teacher is assaulted, or a student is arrested for selling drugs, will reciprocate with positive coverage of a successful reading program, an outstanding science project, or a drive by students to provide food and clothing for the underprivileged.

That's not to say that the positive news necessarily will get the kind of banner headline, front-page treatment given to negative news, but it will be used. Conversely, when a school district blocks the news media from covering negative news, two things will happen: one, the media will get the negative news from someone, even if it's second hand, inaccurate and blown out of proportion, and, two, you can forget about any coverage of positive news.

In blunt words, the media generally is dealing from a position of strength. You're not. You can huff and puff and bluff; you can play your cards any way you want, but in the end, you're going to lose.

## Try the Positive Approach

Yet, there need not be an adversary relationship between the media and the schools. Most media people see their jobs exactly the same way educators see theirs: servicing the community by educating it. And the easier educators make it for the media to do their job, the more balanced, or maybe even favorable the coverage will be.

Richard D. Bagin, administrative assistant for school/community relations for the Bensalem Township (Pa.) School District, has the following advice for dealing with the media:

✓ Respect the press as professionals and treat them accordingly. Most reporters today have to go through a similar training as our teachers—four years of college and an internship to boot—so they deserve the same respect as all college graduates. We should treat them by the Golden Rule so professional relationships can blossom. That doesn't mean things will go the way you always want them—far from it—but it does mean your relationship with the media will be on more solid ground which can be mighty handy in a time of crisis.

- Be available to speak on the issues. Perhaps the worst thing we can do is avoid or duck questions by conveniently not being available and stating "no comment." The "no comment" response only causes a reporter to think you are hiding something that could result in "bad press" for you and your district.

- If you don't know the answer, say so, but promise to get back in 15 minutes or before deadline with an answer. By being conveniently absent when a reporter calls, you again start the reporter's Woodward and Bernstein juices flowing to unravel the scandal you *must* be hiding. And besides, the paper may just start an attack on why their 38-thousand dollar chief school administrator is always out of the office. Bad press, yes, and rightfully so.

- Admit your mistakes when you make them. If something runs amuck—admit it—but in the same breath explain what you're doing to rectify the problem. You'll be respected for that.

- Don't talk in gobbledygook and technical jargon. Speak and write in concrete terms and even provide a glossary of educational terms to all new reporters.

- Give out home phone numbers of top personnel designated to speak with the media.

- Encourage timely articles on long range planning, assessment results, sex education, declining enrollments so our district's positions are well understood.

- Encourage feature articles and photo features by providing potential material for the media.

- Maintain a file of updated biographies of all top administrators as well as mug shots of board members and coaches.

- Prepare background material for board meetings so that board action can clearly be understood.

- Alert reporters and photographers when cancellations occur.

- Periodically pick up the phone and tell a reporter that he or she did a good job.

- ✓ Learn what kind of photo assignments the paper will run and not run.
- ✓ Treat all media fairly, do not play favorites.
- ✓ Be honest not secretive—what do you have to hide?

## How To Complain

Yet, there is still another major responsibility, Bagin says, and that is knowing when and how to complain about unfair media coverage. His advice:

> We have a responsibility to let the media know when they've made a mistake. Take your complaint first to your reporter and point out the factual mistake. If factual errors continue, than it's time to alert the reporter's boss, the editor, of the continued inaccuracy through documentation. Now that may sound like a "heavy" process, but remember you wouldn't fire a teacher just because a parent said the teacher was biased, so don't expect an editor to fire a reporter on your say-so.
>
> Most media people are after fair and accurate reporting and they'll see that you get it if your complaints are legitimate and you follow the proper channels. Don't complain because they ran that unflattering picture of you, or don't complain to a reporter about the headline that didn't have anything to do with the story because the reporters rarely have anything to do with headlines. Make your legitimate complaints factual and steer them to the right people and you'll see results if the paper's management is worth its salt.

## New Releases

The news release is the communications device most used by school districts and least appreciated by the media.

They're used because they are the easiest way to reach the media and they impress the board and the PTA. But they usually are not appreciated because they are frequently poorly written, long-winded and contain little real news.

Anyone who ever worked for a newspaper knows that the person who winds up with 90% of the news releases a paper receives is the janitor, and he rarely has time to read them as he carries out the trash.

That's not to say that news releases can't be useful to both school districts and the media. Properly prepared and properly used they can be a great help to both.

**First, the use:** If you have an item of general interest to all your media outlets—like test scores, budget information, lunch and bus schedules, board meeting dates, kindergarten registration and the like—do a news release and send it out.

Such releases can be particularly helpful in interpreting test scores and budget information to the reporter who may not fully understand either process, and the use of information like bus schedules and kindergarten registration dates are public service items that most media gladly accept.

But unless you're in a small community with only one or two news outlets, don't send out news releases on science fairs, awards from the National Assn. of Lefthanded Biologists, faculty teas and trips to the planetarium.

Instead, pick up the telephone, pick out a particular outlet, like a newspaper that uses many photo features, or a TV station that likes an off-beat story now and then. Suggest to a reporter, person-to-person, that there might be a particularly interesting project at the science fair, or that awed children in a planetarium might make a good TV feature, or that the lefthanded biologist being honored is an interesting person with other redeeming qualifications that just might provide good interview possibilities.

When you have a good feature, like a graduate with 12 years perfect attendance, a parent with six children graduating from night school after 15 years, or a science class studying a six-foot boa constrictor, put that news release paper away and, again, pick up the telephone.

All your news outlets aren't going to rush over to interview the graduates or take pictures of the snake. With only a news release on a potential feature, you run the chance of having a potentially eye-catching story wind up as a two or three paragraph story under the truss ad on page 37. But a single paper or TV station, for instance, if contacted personally and promised the feature exclusively, just might play it up for all it's worth.

In other words, you've got to get the most out of each positive event, and a person-to-person approach is usually far superior to an impersonal piece of paper that has obviously been sent to every news outlet in town.

However, when news releases are necessary—and sometimes they **are** necessary—there are some basic guidelines that should be followed.

Al Erxleben, coordinator of public information for the Florida Dept. of Education, has the following suggestions:

- Be sure you cover all the facts and are completely factual—don't editorialize.

- Simplify punctuation and hold it to a minimum.

- Always type your releases, double spaced, use 8½ × 11 inch paper and use one side of the paper only.

- Always use the same format—same headings, same paragraph indentations, same margins. This helps to make your releases more professional and more recognizable.

- Do not hyphenate at the end of typewritten lines.

- Do not break a paragraph at the end of the page—and number all pages.

- Always adhere to the same spelling and capitalization style. You'll develop your own capitalization style and once you have, stick to it. Use a standard dictionary for spelling and, here again, be consistent. When using the word "catalog," don't spell it one way one time and another way another time.

- Make sure the words in your release are spelled correctly—especially the names. And before distributing your news release to the media, proofread over and over, again and again. Complete accuracy should be your goal. Typographical or editorial errors in spelling, tend to make the facts—all the facts—in a news release suspect. If a well-known name is misspelled, how will the reporter who receives your news release know that you are being accurate when you say your school district spent $987.65 last year per student?

- Accuracy and speed are the hallmarks of the good information officer. Always make sure of your facts. Double check them, if you have any doubts. but for heaven's sake, if you don't know, don't guess!

- Keep your releases timely. If your board meets at night, make sure the newspapers, radio and TV stations have a summary of board action the first thing the next morning. Stale news is no news.

# RADIO

As school districts concentrate their communication energies into vying for newspaper headlines and for a spot on the six o'clock TV news, far too often they ignore another extremely important communications medium—the radio.

And conversely, sometimes radio stations, especially the ones with 55 minutes of rock and five minutes of news straight off the radio wire, ignore local events, at least until they are forced to scurry around looking for mandated public service programming.

Who needs them, you say? You do. Because as any parent of a teenager knows, the stations that feature "top of the chart" singers and groups are the stations that attract the major share of the student audience. And students, occasionally, contrary to popular opinion, **do** listen to the news.

William E. Henry, associate director of the American Assn. of School Administrators, puts it this way: **"Radio: friend or foe?** It is up to you to decide. If properly used, radio newsmen and program directors can be a vital, if not key link, in telling the school story to your community. If misused, however, radio broadcasters can cause serious and often irreparable harm and damage to your credibility and image."

Henry offers the following tips on the use of radio to tell the school district story:

- **Use radio for emergency announcements concerning your school system** (snow emergencies, early closings, late openings, etc.): Publicize widely in your community what station(s) will carry "official" school announcements and work out a code arrangement with station personnel to avoid crank calls.

- **Spot announcements:** Utilize radio for 10-, 20-, 30- or 60-second spot announcements concerning some particular aspect of your school district program (board of education meeting dates, holiday schedules, open house nights, dramatic and athletic events, honors programs, PTA meetings, etc.).

- **Vignette shows:** Use radio to highlight in short, punchy broadcasts (preferably five minutes) concerning activities of the school district—such things as curriculum changes, explanations of board of education actions, the hiring of new personnel (especially new superintendents), new instructional programs.

- **In-depth programs:** Once a month, half-hour public service productions devoted to an in-depth analysis of the broad program activities of your school district (guidance counseling, vocational education, distributive education, office work experience, classes for the handicapped or gifted, etc.)

- **Live board of education broadcasts:** Encourage a commercial station in your community, or the school radio station if you have one, to broadcast live sessions of board of education meetings so that your citizens will be able to hear first-hand the key decisions and deliberations of the board.

- **Spot news:** Reaction, statements, explanations, or answers to key questions making news in your district and community.

**Things to keep in mind when using (or increasing your use of) radio:**

- **Radio stations deal in seconds,** and cannot use long statements and statements filled with "educationese" on the air. If you have a major announcement to make, issue a news release for the print media, but boil it down to the key ingredients (60 seconds or less) for use by radio.

- **Remember** that radio broadcasters (as all journalists) are generally trying to answer six key questions in any story they air. These are "Who, What, When, Where, Why and How." Make sure the Five W's and the H are answered in all broadcast news releases.

- **Get to know** broadcast newsmen on a professional, first-name basis. Most news stories get distorted because of a lack of understanding of the newsman, not by design.

- **Don't attempt to mislead** radio broadcasters concerning breaking news happenings in your school system. Give them the facts as you understand them, even if it is, in your opinion, a story which will not enhance the district's image.

The main ingredient, once again, is person-to-person contact. Don't assume a radio station isn't interested in school news and public service programming. And don't even ask on the telephone. Just call the station manager, make an appointment to see him or her, and sit down and talk about it. You may be surprised at the results.

## Chapter 8.

# Handling the Basics

The five concerns discussed in this section probably account for more professional school public relations expert's time or school administrator's than any other function—excepting the production of a school district newsletter. They are at the core of what people want to know about and how they can be involved.

## ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Fifteen or 20 years ago, the thought of a citizens advisory committee to help a school district do a better job was an anathema to most boards of education around the country. Most boards ruled with an iron hand, few of them even bothered to hear citizens at their monthly meetings, much less form a citizens advisory committee. If someone dared to try to tell a school board how to set policy for a school district, that person was viewed, more often than not, as a misinformed and misguided soul, at best, or, more likely, as some kind of radical troublemaker.

Today, after the educational reforms of the 1960s, and after federal legislation that mandated advisory committees as one criteria for federal aid to education, citizen advisory committees are recognized as necessary, and helpful, in most school systems throughout this country.

To be sure, there are holdouts. One school district, responding to a recent survey by *Education USA*, wrote in bright red ink on the questionnaire: "Why should we have a citizens advisory committee when we have a board of education?"

Yet, as most school districts seek to improve or regain public confidence, one of their first actions is, or should be, to form a citizens advisory committee.

John C. Lopez, a school board member at the Glendale (Ariz.) Elementary School District #40, says: "The time for listing for and against arguments on citizen participation has long since passed for the vast majority of schools. The questions now are:

- How do we set up a committee?
- How shall its members be named?
- How do we get most value from its work?
- What kinds of tasks should a committee be asked to undertake?
- What are the characteristics of a committee which makes the best contribution to a public school system?"

With many school districts echoing Lopez' philosophy, citizens advisory committees have proliferated in the 1970s, not only as central advisory committees to the superintendent and the board of education, but also as individual school advisory committees working with principals and teachers at the building level. And he adds:

> School authorities have discovered thay have at their disposal an abundant supply of public talent, time and willingness to work. Further, most school people believe this reservoir of public energy and wisdom can be useful to the school system, the community and the children. The value of citizens committees originally stems from their continuing success in promoting special bond issues, getting voter approval on tax levies and pushing through school budgets.
>
> But school authorities started to recognize a good thing when they saw one and they began to make the most of it. Citizens committee are now called into action for attacks not only on fiscal problems but on problems representing the entire range of school administration, instruction and community relations; and not on an ad hoc basis, but for continuing service.

There are hazards and dangers ahead when spurious reasons are advanced for the creation of committees and when these groups are misused in any of the following ways:

- **The committee as a rubber stamp:** When boards of education, or administrators, initiate questionable or controversial programs or policies, they often seek the support of a citizens committee. Rubber stamping an unsound idea seldom prevents future trouble.

- **The committee as shock absorber:** When attacks and criticism in a community rise and spread, some school authorities are tempted to create a citizens group to absorb some of the flak. Both the ethics and effectiveness of such a move can be questioned.

- **The committee as promoter:** When school authorities feel insecure in areas of budget, bond issues, curriculum change, student discipline or teacher negotiations, one natural tendency is to fall back on the committee as propagandizer.

- **The committee as bailer-out:** School boards in trouble with the community, teachers, students or taxpayers often create—in a hurry—citizens groups to save them. There is little evidence of successful outcomes in such instances.

There is a general agreement, however, that school systems get in trouble because of poor school board policies or weak administration, and no citizens committee can correct these weaknesses. Nor can citizens committees come up with instant recommendations to get a faltering school system out of its sloughs of inefficiency. Only when organized for a sound purpose and only when nurtured with good care can the citizens group promote the cause of education in the community.

"Sound purposes," Lopez suggests, should include "agreeing on education philosophy for the district, long-range planning, significant curriculum revision and instituting major organizational change," Also, he says, when a school board gets involved in new concepts, such as open education, year-round schools or career education in the elementary schools, "the citizens committee is a proper medium for helping the board get new insights, facts and concepts."

However, he warns, problems can occur if citizens committees go beyond their assigned advisory roles. "The cracks of failure," he warns, "began to show in the district-wide committee when it becomes entangled with details of running a school."

Often the greatest benefit of advisory committees may be at the building level. School building administrators need advice on a large number of issues—from playground supervision to rules on smoking—and parents are frequently willing to give such advice. Building administrators also need workers for a larger number of tasks, and again, citizens are usually willing to contribute their time and effort.

It is true, he concedes, that there can be problems associated with a citizens committee, such as guidelines for its operation and composition, the extent of its authority, what it should do and what it shouldn't do, how it should be dealt with if it tries to assume too much authority, its relationship with both the school board and the administration, and more.

The following sections taken from the 1977 NSPRA publication, *Linking the Schools and the Community*, provide practical, general guidelines for avoiding some of the pitfalls of citizens advisory committees and if followed, help insure a productive and cooperative working relationship between the committee and the school district.

## Committee Composition

The membership of any committee depends, in part, on the function of the group. Some committees will require special expertise. Most general interest committees, however, strive to get a representative cross-section of the district or of the neighborhood school. Criteria may include geographic location, income, ethnic background, religion, race and organizational affiliation.

The Upper St. Clair (Pa.) Township School District has a well-organized procedure for selecting advisory committee members that is both inclusive and representative of the community. A brochure is sent to residents explaining the purposes and limitations of district advisory committees. Residents are encouraged to mail in a perforated form to become part of the "membership bank." Any community resident, age 16 or older, is eligible. Returned cards are filed according to four age categories: 16-21, 22-44, 45-64 and 65 and older. Prospective advisors have the option of including their occupation and special interest or area of expertise. Those with special skills are coded with an "S" and their application is cross-references. When the school board creates a new committee or has a vacancy to fill, a drawing is held, using the appropriate age groups. The guidelines call for general committees to be composed of a cross-section of township residents. About one-half the membership chosen for a specialized committee has expertise in the topic to be studied.

When organizing for change, it is a good idea to include some of a school district's critics in the planning. James Walter and Jack McCall, writing in *School and Community* magazine, describe a successful effort to pass a bond issue in a small Missouri district. After six bond issue defeats in seven years, the school board appointed an advisory committee to reopen communication in the polarized community. "To avoid creating a 'Booster Club,''' the two men write, "the board asked community leaders to nominate persons for the committee who had opposed school policy in the past, but who would calmly and responsibly express their opposition." To provide balance on the committee, the board also sought nominations of persons who had never been involved in the schools and persons who could be counted on to support school policies. The 70 citizens who accepted the board's invitation worked for eight months analyzing the district and making recommendations. The following year, two bond issues were passed.

In *The Open Partnership: Equality in Running the Schools,* author Charlotte Ryan describes the ideal committee as one that has both open and equal membership. Such a committee is open to students, teachers, parents, citizens and administrators—in short, any group that is likely to be affected by the decision. "Since change in institutions depends on change in individuals," Ryan writes, "it is important that all who will be affected by the decisions involved have an opportunity to share in making them, if change is to be effective." Equal membership. Ryan added, is a characteristic that is learned when people who are working together "come to appreciate each other's different perspectives and knowledge."

## Guidelines for Advisory Committees

The kiss of death for a district-wide advisory committee is to create such a committee without a clear mandate. Even general committees should be given a task at the outset, so members do not feel they are wasting their time. Orientation and training are important, but they should not be allowed to become the sole purpose of the committee. In a study of advisory committees in a large county-wide school system, positive and negative comments were collected from committee members. One of the negative comments, stated by a member of an area advisory committee, was, "Too much time [is] spent 'educating' us, instead of addressing major issues. But the time we are considered well informed enough to form an opinion, the year is over, frustrations are heightened, and a feeling of futility has set in."

Another trap to avoid is giving the committe members the impression they have more authority than they actually do. An *Education U.S.A.* survey asked school districts that use advisory committees to describe how much power or authority the committees have. Without exception, the committees were advisory only. This is not to say the committees are not influential. In the words of Albany (Minn.) Area Schools Supt. Duane Hill, "It's pretty difficult for the school board to reject a committee's advice."

Still, in some instances, it is necessary to reject the committee's recommendations. Except in a few rare cases where school boards have formally delegated authority to a separate group, the boards are legally responsible for policy decisions and must retain ultimate authority over those decisions.

To avoid pitfalls like these, and to provide uniformity among advisory committees, many school boards have developed guidelines to govern the creation and operation of such committees. The Milwaukee Board of School Directors adopted comprehensive guidelines to govern board-initiated, administration-initiated and individual school-community advisory groups. As described by Milwaukee Supt. Lee McMurrin, the policies governing board-initiated committees state that:

- ✓ Board-initiated advisory committees will be district-wide in scope;
- ✓ Committee members will be advised at the outset that their powers are advisory;
- ✓ Members will be appointed by the school board president;
- ✓ Committee membership will ensure representation of the entire community;
- ✓ The committee will receive a letter of invitation stating the purpose and scope of the committee and the length of time each member is being asked to serve;
- ✓ The letter will either designate a chairman or specify that the committee elect its chairman;
- ✓ The letter will specify the time and place of the first meeting, the dates on which reports are to be submitted, and the date by which the committee should complete its task;
- ✓ The superintendent or designee will serve the committee as a resource or liaison (any staff liaisons shall serve as nonvoting members of the committee);
- ✓ Board members are encouraged to participate in advisory committees as nonvoting and nonoffice holding members;
- ✓ A specific budget will be established if the duties of the committee require expenditures of money;

- ✓ All committee meetings are open to the public and a minimum of five days public notice should be given prior to each meeting;

- ✓ The superintendent and staff are expected to review and respond to committee recommendations presented to the board;

- ✓ After the board acts on the committee's report, the committee will be considered dissolved, and a letter recognizing the contributions of the committee will be sent to each member.

The key policies governing administration-initiated advisory groups in Milwaukee are that such groups should not compete with board-initiated or school-level committees, and that studies done by the committees and their recommendations should be reported to the board. If the committee includes employe groups, those representatives are to be selected by their bargaining unit. McMurrin said advisory groups created to comply with federal laws, like Title I, have a full-time staff member assigned to them.

The school-level advisory committee works under the guidance of the principal, who is expected to work closely with the local PTA or PTO to organize the committee. The guidelines encourage representation by teachers, students, classified personnel, parents and other community members. Parents of children in the school are to comprise a majority of the committee. Each group that is represented should select its own members. In schools that have separate advisory committees for federal programs, like Head Start, the policies encourage these committees to be represented on the full school committees.

The committees are expected to meet at least four times a year, and to communicate with their constituents with newsletters and posters. The policies also establish a "chain of command" which the committees may use to gain additional information or to act upon a request. In Milwaukee, the chain is the local school principal, an administrative specialist at the district level, the superintendent and, ultimately, the board of school directors.

## Guidelines for School-Level Councils

"The biggest mistake administrators make," says Carl Marburger of the National Committee for Citizens in Education, "is that they give citizens the impression they have more power to make changes than they actually do.

Administrators can also unknowingly scuttle a group by not giving them a specific task. "The biggest problem with school-initiated committees," said Don Davies, Institute for Responsive Education president, "is that they are created without a clear mandate.

"Most parents start with very modest expectations," Davies continued. He listed four possibilities for citizen review: (1) **selection of a principal**—school-level councils can interview candidates and recommend their first, second and third choices to the superintendent; (2) **budgeting**—councils can set priorities on budget items that can be determined at the local level; (3) **program evaluation**—councils can assess the school program year by year, starting with one subject or one grade level; or (4) **new programs**—councils can review and approve or veto proposed new programs.

In *Schools Where Parents Make a Difference,* Davies listed the following guidelines for local school councils:

- Decisions about size, membership, function and ways of working should be made by each school district through joint planning, involving the school committee, the superintendent, other central office administrators, teachers and teacher organizations, parents, citizens and students. Local conditions, needs, experience and values are the best guides for deciding what kind of council plan, if any, should be tried.

- Initiative can come from school people or community people. Regardless of who takes the first step, joint planning is essential from the beginning. A plan for collaboration developed unilaterally by administrators is not likely to succeed any better than a plan developed by a parent group without the genuine involvement of others who will be affected by the plan.

- Council members should be elected by a democratic process determined during planning. While a majority of the members should be parents of the children attending the school, councils should also include teachers and other school staff, community residents and students. Even in elementary schools, the perspective of students—the "consumers" of the programs—can be helpful.

- Membership in the council should be representative of diverse groups and interests in the community, including different racial, cultural and economic backgrounds, and different political or social viewpoints.

- Existing parent groups should play an important role in developing plans for a new council. It is important to coordinate such groups as parent-teacher-student associations (PTSAs), Title I or bilingual advisory committees. Having a school council does not eliminate the need for other groups. An existing PTSA, for example, can become an arm of a school council.

- A cooperative and mutually supportive relationship between the school council and the school principal is of special importance. The principal is in a key position to aid or block the development of an effective council.

- The members of a school council and the principal need assistance, information, orientation and planning for the council to have a fair chance of success. Lack of access to information about school policies, budgets and problems, and lack of training in organizing a group are the major causes of failure. Such support need not cost much money. But some financial support is necessary to cover the costs of planning, training workshops, duplication of materials and newsletters, and other means of communication with all members of the school community.

- The school board should see that each school council is evaluated at least once a year and that each council reports annually on its work, achievements and problems. The basis for such evaluation must be included in the original design of the council so standards for judging success are understood and agreed upon.

- An effective council needs written rules for its operation—developed jointly with and approved by the school board.

## Evaluating the Committee

Two underlying assumptions are integral to any successful school board advisory committee relationship. The first is that the committee's opinions will be respected and recommendations will be given serious consideration. The second assumption is that advisory committees have a right to receive an answer to their recommendations. The board should say which recommendations will be adopted. When recommendations are not adopted, the board should say **why not** for each one.

One pitfall to the use of advisory committees is that a school board can go overboard in creating advisory committees. When this happens, administrators become bogged down in filling committee requests for information. In such cases, the board may be abdicating its leadership responsibilities. To keep committees on the track and to guard against creating too much of a good thing, periodic evaluations of the committee structure can be helpful. The Upper St. Clair, Pa., school district has devised two evaluation forms. The first is to be completed by committee members and the superintendent or staff liaison to the committee. The second evaluates the committee from the perspective of the school. See pages 102-103.

## THE BASIC INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

Many school districts, in competing for space in the print media and for air time in the broadcast media, spend much of their energy promoting "unique" or "innovative" programs; programs that are different, that have a flair, that attract attention.

It's only natural. Schools without walls, or open education, or alternative programs usually are newsworthy. And the media is not in business to promote school district PR. They are in business to report the news.

Yet, in this competition for news space, the regular, basic core curriculum—a matter of vital importance to most parents—many times is lost somewhere in the PR shuffle.

It's fine if a school district can provide Johnny with a "free school," or classes in an art museum, or an airplane engine to repair. Some students vitally need these kinds of programs to maintain their interest in school.

Yet, first, all students must learn to read, and the job a school district does in teaching reading to each and every pupil is more important to good community and parent relations in the long run than column after column of news coverage of special programs and events.

The axiom still holds true, despite the vast changes in public education during the past 20 years, that the very best public relations agent a school district can have is a student who goes home at the end of the day and says, "You know, mom, I really learned something in school today."

Ben Brodinsky, an educational public relations consultant and former school board member from Old Saybrook, Conn., explains: "The usual and ordinary things taking place in your classrooms form the best base for the public relations of a local district. The continuing instructional program—for all students, by all teachers, in all areas of instruction—must be utilized on a continuing basis, for informational and public relations activities."

# Citizen Advisory Committee Evaluation Form

- How well did the committee succeed in accomplishing its assignment?
- Did the committee seek help when needed?
- What were the difficulties experienced in actively involving all the members in the committee work?
- Did you feel that this committee was in conflict with any other school or community organization?
- In your opinion, are the guidelines for a citizen advisory committee clear and explicit?
- Was there strict adherence to the guidelines by all concerned? If not, why?
- Was there positive, two-way communication between the committee and the school district? If not, why?
- What were the total manhours of certified staff?
- What were the strengths of the committee?
- What were the weaknesses of the committee?
- What could have been done to improve the committee's effectiveness?
- How can this evaluation format be improved?

# Board of Education Evaluation Form

- How well did the committee succeed in accomplishing its assignment?
- Did the committee adhere to the guidelines? Explain.
- Was the committee work helpful to the school board? Explain.
- Do you believe that the additional workload involving the committee work for the superintendent and/or designee was justified?
- What was the additional workload for you as a board member?
- Was two-way communication enhanced by the work of this committee?
- In your judgment, what were the strengths and the weaknesses of this committee's work?
- What is your evaluation of the committee's work?
- What is your evaluation of the committee's recommendations?

"So, you have some unusual, some innovative, some so-called "more newsworthy" instructional projects? he continues. These, too, can be a base for public relations. But do not spend all your time and resources on the "flashy" projects. Parents, citizens, taxpayers want to know what their children are taught, what they're learning. It is these interests that can form the base for effective PR. Don't boast, just tell."

Brodinsky's advice:

**List What You Want To Tell, Inform, Share**

- On the elementary level: Decide what you'd like to communicate about—reading instruction—mathematics—science—social studies—the arts! List other instructional areas. Be selective. You can't do everything in one school year.
- On the secondary level: What areas would you select for attention—language arts—science—math—social studies—the arts—vocational education—what about guidance and counseling?

**What Do You Believe the People Want To Know?**

- The content of the instructional areas?
- The textbooks and instructional materials in use?
- The methods applied?
- Individualized approaches?
- Independent study programs?
- Use of audiovisuals, field trips, resource people in the classrooms?
- What about your programs for handicapped? Retarded? Gifted?

**Decide On The Media, The Outlets, The Channels You Can Use**

- The weekly press?
- Newsletters to parents?
- Speeches by teachers and administrative staffs before local groups—count the local groups which may provide audiences (you may have more than you realize)?

- The superintendent's annual report?
- The special, one-shot leaflet or brochure?
- Very brief leaflets on selected areas of the instructional program?
- Radio spot announcements?
- The open board of education meeting focusing on reading instruction, the kindergarten program, etc.?

In short, don't put all your PR eggs, or even most of them, in the media basket. Cater to your parents. Tell them, at the district level, and even more importantly at the building level, what goes into the basic educational program. Be proud of your core curriculum. Promote it everywhere and anywhere you can. It's still the backbone of your school system and of your community relations.

## SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

Another area that cries out for better public relations in many school districts is the school board meeting.

It presents an ideal chance for school boards to communicate with parents and community leaders. Yet, in far too many cases, parents and community leaders go away mad; frustrated at not being listened to, angry at being treated brusquely, and appalled at listening to the board members fight among themselves while major issues go unresolved.

In its book, *PR For School Board Members*, the American Assn. of School Administrators says:

> The importance of the school board meeting as a communications vehicle should not be underestimated. It presents an excellent opportunity to improve relations with the community and with the various publics—both external and internal—served by the board. Properly conducted, the board meeting offers board members a powerful and effective public relations device that goes a long way toward opening up true communications. Poorly conducted, the meeting can erode public support and undermine the overall public relations efforts of the district."

Nick Goble, public relations director for the Pennsylvania School Boards Assn., puts it this way:

There should be no surprises between board members and administration (at the meeting). Nothing can break down the business-like image of the board, crack its credibility, and sever its working relationship internally, as open criticism and confrontation at public meetings. Board members should not 'play' to the audience. Administrators should not allow the board to be caught in embarrassing situations. Through proper planning with the board president and the administrative team, the superintendent can prepare for the unexpected and, at the same time, set the stage for the board to conduct its affairs in an orderly fashion. Consequently, it is imperative that the administration maintain frank, open and continuing communications with the board. On the other hand, the board has a responsibility (through proper procedures) to inform the administration of citizen inquiries, complaints and concerns.

## What Do the Meetings Say About You

Rose M. Bullis, director of school/community relations for the Washoe County (Nev.) School District, suggests that school districts ask themselves, "What do your school board meetings say **about** you?" She contends that the success of a school board meeting "is directly related to the advance planning, the manner in which it is conducted, the extent of focus on students and curriculum, and the 'welcome' atmosphere in the board room."

Her detailed suggestions for better public relations through better school board meetings are:

### Plan Ahead

- Information packets should contain comprehensive background information on each agenda item and should be distributed three or four days before the meeting.
- Accompanying materials and informational items should be given to the board before they are given to staff members, the press, or the public. "Hand deliver" if necessary.
- Distribute the agenda not only to the board, but also to key people in the community, the press, and key staff members.
- People who wish to speak on any item on the agenda should be urged to call or write in order to insure time on the agenda; but set the ground rules so that all speakers stay within a time limit and are not repetitious.

- Thought must be given to the placement of items on the agenda. (Strategy, you know.)

- Have board members appear on television and radio before board meetings to tell the public what is on the agenda and invite them to attend meetings. (Also, give a round-up on radio and television after the meeting.)

**Streamline the Meeting**

- Have plenty of extra agendas at each meeting for visitors.

- Get organized so you use time efficiently; operate board meetings in a parliamentary fashion; and begin on time.

- A suggested time allotment should be included with each agenda item. This, of course, will not be followed precisely, but should help to curb the verbose.

- Presentations by the administrative staff must be carefully prepared.

- Involve staff members in the presentation of as many items as possible in each board meeting.

- Be sure everyone can see the visual presentations, hear what is being said, and receives a copy of handouts.

- The staff should not overreact to criticism and never become defensive.

- Follow statutes to the letter and hold executive sessions **only** when matters dealing with personnel are to be discussed.

- Involve the public.

- Have a special bulletin containing the highlights of each board meeting out and in the hands of all staff members, key citizens and news media directors as soon as possible after the meeting.

**Focus on Students and the Curriculum**

- A display of student work should be arranged for each meeting. Consider having the flag salute led by a student, musical numbers,

## Board Members Are 'PR' Persons, Too

Mike Torkelson, director of information for the Minnesota School Boards Assn., has the following public relations ideas for individual school board members:

- Set board policy on public relations and communications and direct the superintendent to develop a program following this policy.
- Visit your schools on a regular basis. Talk to students, teachers and other district employes.
- Become a part of your school system's speakers bureau and be willing to talk to the community or student groups about schools and their operation—but do your homework first.
- Appear on local television and radio interview shows.
- Visit your local editor and leave both a personal picture and a biographical sketch for his or her use. For television stations, arrange for a slide picture of yourself to be in their files along with a biographical sketch.
- Uninformed public? Conduct a series of informational sessions for district residents. Be honest, be prepared, be interesting.
- Be informed and aware of accomplishments by your employes whether it be school related or otherwise. Send them a congratulatory note.

- Keep newspaper clippings of accomplishments by students. Send them and their parents a note.
- Recognize the community contributions of citizens, especially those who have been involved in the schools. Send official letters of congratulations to each.
- Keep in touch with your constituency—by telephone and written materials in addition to your personal contacts. If you have a "hot" issue, take a random sampling of opinion. People like to be asked their opinions.
- Have someone develop a "welcome" brochure for visitors to school board meetings.
- Circulate before and after meetings and introduce yourself to those you do not know and thank them for their interest and attendance—even if you didn't like what they had to say.
- Take time to ride a school bus route or two during the year—you would be surprised at the rapport you can build up with bus drivers and students.
- Make an effort to be visible at all school events—not just for a winning football team.
- Turn people on—be enthusiastic yourself.

or other student presentations at the opening of the meeting. (5-10 min.) Each meeting should include at least one presentation of interesting programs or teaching techniques by students and teachers. (5-20 min.) Recognize outstanding programs and practices in the schools, and have the staff members responsible at the meetings and introduce them publicly.

- Students and staff members who have done something that deserves recognition should be presented at each meeting.
- Be sure there is some vehicle for two-way communication with students. Students are part of the public, and what they say has great impact with parents.

### Humanize the Meeting

- Keep in mind that education is a people business.
- Greet people, hand them an agenda, and make them feel welcome. Make an effort to know their names the second time they appear.
- Have a coffee break.
- The board room should be easy to find and have an adequate parking area.
- Schedule meetings so they are convenient to the public, too. Perhaps one meeting a month at 4 p.m. and one at 7 p.m.
- Invite special groups to have representatives attend board meetings—Taxpayers Association, League of Women Voters, PTA Council, etc. Be sure they are introduced when they first attend and are spoken to at each meeting. Make them feel welcome.
- Provide an informational brochure for visitors to school board meetings.

## Going to the People

Another good public relations idea for school boards is to hold their meetings at various locations throughout the school district.

Such meetings provide school board members and central office personnel an opportunity to listen to the concerns of a wider cross-section of citizens; they give more citizens a chance to meet the board members, and they provide an ideal opportunity to inform more members of the community about the operation of their schools.

Ruth F. Drago, a commissioner of the Mobile County (Ala.) Public School System, and Dixie Wooten, the school district's supervisor of public relations, explain how the Mobile board moved several of its meetings out into the community:

> We set up six meetings, in the urban and rural areas of the county. A 26-minute slide presentation was developed which detailed each of the six divisions of our system—pupil personnel, business, general administration, personnel, curriculum and special services—and how all relate to the total operation of the schools. After the program was developed, a preview showing was held to give area leaders and members of the news media an opportunity to view the audiovisual presentation.
>
> To encourage parents and citizens to attend, news releases were sent out periodically and the two members of the community relations department made audio tapes for radio public service announcements.
>
> School board members as well as central office personnel attended each meeting. Persons attending were introduced to school officials and then shown the slide-tape presentation. Following this, parents were given an opportunity to ask questions. If they chose not to ask questions in the open meeting, they were asked to put their questions in writing and were promised written replies. Schools where meetings were held were responsible for after-meeting refreshments and general arrangements.
>
> Written questions from parents and interested persons were given to the public information office, which had the responsibility of researching answers and sending letters to the parents.
>
> The program was financed through the community component of the Emergency School Aid Act project. Total cost was $2,550 for art work, graphics, slides and narration.
>
> Reception by the parents was very positive. About 80% of parent responses received were most encouraging, with parents feeling that the meetings served a definite need and should be continued. It is interesting to note that parents even provided suggested topics to be covered in other meetings, such as building program plans and curriculum.

# THE SCHOOL DISTRICT BUDGET

Perhaps no other single factor causes a school district more negative public relations than its budget.

And more often than not, it is not the budget itself that gets a school district into trouble with its community. It's the poor job many school officials do in explaining and interpreting their budget to the public.

Tom D. Barkelew, superintendent of the Centinela Valley (Calif.) Union High School District, puts it this way: "In interpreting their budget to staff and the community, school boards and administrators face their most critical teaching job ever. Unless they make a superhuman effort to educate all district employes and the public about money—about where it comes from and where it goes—they're doomed to be trapped between the proverbial rock and a hard place. School boards and superintendents have too long been content to let the school business official run the financial show, listening only to the bottom line. If you're not already making some effort to communicate with your staff and the public about your budget, plan to begin doing it immediately."

Tom Shannon, former deputy superintendent of the San Diego schools and now executive director of the National School Boards Assn., contends:

> The budget, with its potential for communicating the school district's approach to managing the educational enterprise, can be the foremost public relations tool in any district. The problem is that often it is not.

"The format of a school district budget," Shannon says, "must be readily understood by any reasonably intelligent person with a secondary school education." A budget format, he says, should be developed "to tell most accurately and completely the budget story . . . to give a person, who lacks both special expertise in finance and an extensive formal education, a good understanding of what the school board will spend his tax dollar for."

Instead, Shannon continues, far too many school systems are content to present their budgets in the "specific and detailed format prescribed by state fiscal authorities," a format that usually "bewilders even private accountants and bookkeepers, as well as businessmen, who have not had some exposure to the specialized application of government fiscal accounting to school district finance.

Finally, Shannon says, "the school district budget must be developed in accordance with a plan known to all," most preferably as outlined in a budget manual setting forth, "in a clear and precise manner," the way the budget is put together. The manual, he says, should include formulas for personnel employment and assignment and an up-to-date calendar of deliberation and action on the budget at both the administrative and school board levels.

## Involve as Well as Explain

While many school districts still fail to see the logic in Shannon's counsel, some districts take his process even one step further by adding another critical precept: **community involvement in the budget building process.**

One of the national models in this area is the "Choices for Our Children" budget building process of the Montgomery County, Md. schools.

It was begun in the fall of 1968 after the board of education and the superintendent agreed that the best way to earn public support was to give the public more of a voice in the preparation of the school system's operating budget. School district communication staff member Donald Hymes, says:

> Citizens had always had the chance to testify at public hearings—to plead to the board for their own particular pie-in-the-sky. But they were, in fact, just reacting to a budget document already prepared painstakingly over several months by the superintendent and his staff, and their chances of changing the board's mind with a few minutes of testimony were remote.
>
> The idea was to stimulate the public's interest and involvement in the budget process before the staff began compiling their requests and before the board constructed the ballpark within which their negotiators would work. The public phase of the process, therefore, started in September although negotiations did not begin until November and the actual unveiling of the budget request was not required until January or February.
>
> The "Choices" handbook has changed drastically over the years as the financial picture changed, evolving from a shopping list of improvements to a compilation of items destined for the chopping block. But the choices process has stayed pretty much the same. Each year we:

- Distribute a budget discussion guide to describe the educational situation and financial picture and to tell the public what changes are needed and what they will cost.

- Give citizens an opportunity to tell the board and superintendent what their priorities are *before* system officials start putting their figures on paper.

- Let the public know what we did about their earlier priorities, and if we didn't do what they asked, tell them why not.

Hymes said town meetings held early in October brought out hundreds of citizens who wanted more details, and a prenegotiations public hearing before the school board in early November saw four times as many people as usual sign up to testify and required three nights for hearings that had usually taken a couple of hours.

And this additional community interest had another positive impact, Hymes reports. It made the school district write its budget to be understandable to the average citizen. He says:

> As taxpayers begin to scrutinize the school budget with unprecedented zeal, it becomes obvious that the figures, which previously only accountants could understand, had to be reworked to make sense to the average citizen.
>
> It was no easy chore to go through the hundreds of pages of line items and tally up the costs of specific categories of services. But there was motivation. Faced with a mind-boggling total of $131,867,078, the average citizen, without looking any further, is apt to cry, "Too much!" And that's a very bad way to start a budget process.
>
> This new look at the Montgomery County budget told the citizens, for example, that of the $131 million total, more than $80 million was for the cost of people who work directly with children. That amounted to more than 66 per cent. The much-maligned "administrative overhead" turned out to be only 1.5 per cent of the budget, or $2 million. In the area of supplies and materials, it means more to the public to see that of the $4.7 million total, $3.6 million went directly for pupils and the remainder for offices. With the original budget document carrying only broad categories of "salaries" and "supplies," this kind of breakdown made a lot of difference.

A breakdown of staff tended to combat the frequent charge that great hordes of people are concentrated in the central office bureaucracy. A chart showed, in fact, that 89.3 per cent of the staff were school-related, 9.2 per cent were technicians or maintenance workers and only 1.5 per cent were honest-to-goodness bureaucrats.

The **budget discussion guide is the keystone** of the process because it is the reference book on which the rest of the year is based. It must be honest, thorough and, most of all, understandable to the average taxpayer.

The essence of the "Choices" process, Hymes says, is "maintaining a dialogue with the community: providing the public with all the information they need to make sound decisions, and paying attention to their suggestions."

While many school districts don't go as far as Montgomery County in involving citizens in the actual budget building process, most are realizing that the community must become more involved somewhere along the line.

## Sharing Decisions

Like Montgomery County, the Dallas Independent School District has an elaborate, structured budget development process called "Sharing Decisions." It seeks budget input from teachers, principals, students, parents and community groups.

The process began in the late 1960s as the Dallas school system set out to develop a goals program for the 1970s. Holding that quality education depended on effective, long-range planning, including needs assessment, priority setting and resource allocation, the Dallas school board asked the staff and the community at large to offer their ideas on objectives for the '70s.

What evolved was a "professional model for shared decision-making" in which priority goals were set, managers were appointed to develop specific objectives and program budgets, and both goals and objectives were adjusted from year to year to meet the changing needs of the schools, all with the participation of "literally thousands of Dallasites" during the past several years.

Says Dallas Supt. Nolan Estes: "No group has a monopoly on wisdom when it comes to making educational decisions. That's why we've involved everyone with a direct interest in education—

students, parents, teachers, support staff and administrators—in assessing needs and assigning priorities."

The first component of the model involved the setting up of a **District Communications Committee (DCC),** with every employe group in the school system represented. The DCC holds regular monthly meetings to make recommendations to the superintendent for action on school district matters, including the budget.

Another component is an elected **Principals Advisory Committee** to the superintendent, a field advisory team of administrators for rapid input on critical issues. A full-time person who is housed in the central office serves on the superintendent's cabinet as an **ombudsman** for all administrators and as a special assistant to the superintendent.

At the building level, each principal in the district's more than 200 schools has a teacher advisory committee composed of teachers selected by their peers to represent the views of the faculty.

Also, an **extensive leadership program for middle and high school students** focuses young energies on school improvement and information efforts and develops members for SUPER-SAC, the superintendent's Student Advisory Committee, which meets regularly with the superintendent to present the students' point of view.

**Parent involvement** committees range from bilingual and career education to textbooks and food services, and the superintendent meets regularly with clusters of local PTA officers in various parts of the city and with the executive committee of the Dallas PTA City Council.

All these committees become part of **Operation Involvement,** "a systematic effort to assist the board of education in assessing needs, assigning priorities and allocating resources as part of the annual budgeting process."

Operation Involvement members include a representative of each school's teacher advisory committee, 45 students, 20 parents, members of the District Communications Committee, principal representatives, and central office staff. The members are divided into 25 small groups to focus on various areas of the school program. Employes are given released time for monthly sessions, which range from discussions on the latest school problem to field trips for background information.

Several times a year, representatives from each small group meet with the board of education to assist first hand in setting program priorities. Each representative comes armed with input gained through extensive discussions at the individual school level.

"There is little doubt," Estes says, "that the effort has led to better decisions. During these times of crisis management, it is only through such involvement that decision-making can be improved." As a matter of fact, Estes says, "the people in Dallas believe that the decision-making process is often as important as the decision itself."

With a community, and a staff, as closely involved with all aspects of the school system as they are in Dallas, the support for school improvement projects like the city's recently approved $80 million bond issue is built into the communication process.

It does not have to be conceived, nurtured and prompted to go out and convince the community to support school improvement. It is already formed, informed and ready to go; ready to communicate to the community all the knowledge it has gained through its ongoing, systematized communication process with the school district.

The object of the process is credibility; credibility for education, for schools, for school personnel and for the children they serve.

The process itself is communication; communication with the many publics that are involved in a school system, internal and external publics alike. When that communication is frank and full and open and honest, the result is credibility.

**And the result of credibility—particularly budget credibility—is the kind of community confidence without which a school district bond issue or tax levy doesn't stand a ghost of a chance.**

## Budget Cutbacks: Special Handling Needed

For decades school superintendents have heard the cry, "Taxes are too high," and school operating costs are "getting out of hand." Yet, in most school districts the public has either grudgingly or willingly, come up with the dollars necessary to operate the schools. However, a new dimension is arising. In past years school officials could point out that enrollment was climbing, necessitating more teachers and more facilities. But today, because of declining enrollment, the schools have fewer "clients," (needing fewer teachers and less space), but costs continue to soar. The common public cry now is "How can it cost more to educate fewer?"

The following suggestions from Norman Green, superintendent of the Mt. Lebanon School District in Pittsburgh, Pa., provide some help in explaining to your publics this paradox:

**State all significant economy efforts already instituted.**

- Capital outlays (what you've done without)
- Energy reduction efforts
- Staff reductions (not just salaries, but fringe benefits, too)
- Reductions in clerical and custodial services
- Charges for consumable materials and field trip expenses previously provided free
- Increased tuition for summer school
- Reduction or elimination of courses with marginal interest
- Permitting class sizes to rise
- Closing or consolidation of school facilities
- Increased charges for outside groups using school facilities
- And any other items on which you have made savings

**Explain your budget clearly**—particularly those expenditures which are for all practical purposes "uncontrollable".

- Debit service on existing bonds, equipment, etc.
- Negotiated salaries
- Basic utility costs
- Insurance rates
- **Effects of inflation** on the purchasing power of the school district dollar
- Costs of special programs mandated by state or federal, such as compensatory education, education for the handicapped, etc.

**Seek community advice** on how to spend the remaining 15% of the budget which is "discretionary." Such areas could include:

- Transportation—can students walk an extra quarter or half mile to reduce the number of miles of bus service provided?

- Athletic programs.

- Supplies and equipment.

- Proposed capital improvements or additions to the instructional program which may enhance the education program but are not necessary for legal or safety reasons.

And then you need to get involved with a process like those in Montgomery County, Md. and Dallas previously discussed. But, the key is probably an increased public understanding that your school district pocketbook has been hit as hard by inflation as their personal ones. What it cost "then" and what it costs "now" breakdowns for identical items are helpful in increasing this understanding. Inflation may make it just as expensive to supply 200 elementary school students with 200 pencils today as it did to supply 400 students with 400 pencils five years ago.

Use charts, graphs, special newsletters, meetings and all available media to get your message across in an open, honest and factual basis. Don't exaggerate; the actual figures will probably make the presentation clear enough.

## BOND ISSUES AND TAX LEVIES

Building budget credibility is one of the most important public relations functions of a school district. And using that credibility to mount an effective campaign for the passage of a bond issue or a tax levy is most certainly another.

While no one campaign blueprint works everywhere, there are certain definite components to almost every successful school finance election, be it in a big city, in a small town or in any of the thousands of school districts in between.

These components don't fall together by chance. They are the products of a carefully planned political process, the results of the nitty gritty of campaign politics, of asking yourself every conceivable question and coming up with answers to match, of understanding the dynamics of successful electioneering and applying them throughout the school district through the sweat and toil of a dedicated, volunteer campaign team.

The days are gone, in most school districts throughout this country, when a few speeches by the superintendent, a news release or two, an editorial in the local paper and a general, relatively innocuous mailing to local residents would result in a "yes" vote.

It worked once.

Now, it takes an all-out effort by a great many educators, parents, civic groups and interested citizens, welded into a highly functional campaign organization, to be successful at the polls with a school finance election.

And it is not an impossible task. School districts large and small in all parts of the country with all different kinds of problems have been successful in passing bond issues and tax levies.

## A 12-Month Process; A 12-Step Program

School finance campaigns are won or lost on a 12-month program and no amount of last minute, high-powered "PR" can change community attitudes about the schools from negative to positive. Elections to approve operating levies and/or funds through bond issues for capital expenditures are still common in the majority of states across the country. A school-community resident pushing the lever on a voting machine or marking a box on a paper ballot is voting for or against a myriad of issues; the last of which may be the approval of a financial proposition. Hence, the wise school administrator and school board must have an ongoing, district- and voter-wide communication program if success is to be achieved at the ballot box.

This continuous program to communicate—to send and to receive, to speak and to listen—is a team effort involving every member of the school family from the superintendent to the bus driver, from the school-building secretary to board of education member, from parent to member of the citizens advisory committees.

The following 12-step program below has been prepared from materials gathered from all across the country by the National School Public Relations Assn.; ideas that have worked and are key components in successful finance elections. The following list presents the fundamentals; each school district should add its unique approaches.

1. **VOTER REGISTRATION**—This should be an ongoing program. Be certain that you know every registered voter before an election—why waste efforts on people who cannot vote. Check those registered voter lists off against "information cards" and **keep those records up-to-date.** Hold ONE MORE special voter

registration before an election, if possible. This demonstrates your concern that every eligible voter has an opportunity to cast a ballot. DON'T FORGET absentee ballots for those former students now in college or the armed services if this is possible in your state!

2. **COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION**—A full-time ongoing school-community relations programs means that when it is time to present an election issue to your community it is prepared. This "seed" information has been presented to them in many ways over a period of time. There is **no sudden announcement** that we need more money or more schools. It is obvious to all.

3. **A BUILDING-LEVEL PROGRAM** —In most districts the ELEMENTARY SCHOOL BUILDING is the logical unit of community communication on an interpersonal, face-to-face basis. For a 12-month program that means school support, not only at the polls, but in school programs a **Building-Level Communication Program is a must.**

- **A Parent Communication Chairman and Committee**—feedback and listen.

- **Block Workers**—if you have apartments, consider 10 to 15 apartments in any building as a "block."

- **Block Cards**—5 × 7 cards—one set for the block worker, one set for the building principal. They should contain the following information:

  ✓ Street number, zip code, phone number

  ✓ Township and precinct

  ✓ Names of all registered voters at address

  ✓ Names of all nonregistered BUT eligible voters at address

  ✓ Children in public school (number and ages)

  ✓ Children in private school

  ✓ Preschool children

4. **FEEL THE PULSE OF YOUR COMMUNITY**—Before deciding to hold an election in your district, a COMMUNITY ATTITUDE SURVEY should be undertaken. This survey should be part of an ongoing school-community program and taken on a regular basis. Be certain that the survey is tabulated so that you have a districtwide profile and a profile of opinion in **each** elementary school area.

5. **STRONG PARENT LEADERS CHAIR THE FINANCE CAMPAIGN**—These persons should work closely with the district school-community relations office.

- **A Steering Committee in Each Elementary School**—parent, teachers, principal, representatives from the **total school family** should be included on this committee.

- **Secondary schools play a special role**—involve students and parents from junior and senior high schools. Develop a special campaign program segment geared to parents of secondary students as well as using these students on special election projects.

6. **SETTING THE DATE OF AN ELECTION**—Be certain to research the date. Is one day of the week better than another for your district if you have an option for elections? Are there other elections scheduled on the same day? Are there a large number of unemployed people in your district? (If so, you had better rethink your election issue if at all possible.)

7. **SET A THEME**—Make certain this theme is based on **children, students,** not on a **dollar figure.** The latter must be included in any information, of course, but emphasize **children.**

8. **DEVELOP MATERIALS**—

- Fact sheets
- Brochures for parents
- Brochures and/or newsletter for community residents
- Mailing to senior citizens
- Mailing to preschool parents

- Mailing to area clergy, civic and community leaders
- Special TARGET AUDIENCE materials where necessary
- Full information for the media
- Cassette recording and slide/filmstrip for use throughout the community
- Scripts and overhead projection materials for DISTRICT SPEAKERS

9. **ELECTION DAY—**

- Breakfasts, coffees, lunches in schools, if possible
- Transportation and baby-sitters
- **Hot Line number** to call for information—THIS SHOULD BE THROUGHOUT CAMPAIGN and is a **wise investment for districts on a 12-month basis.**
- Block workers check off voters—all those that haven't voted by 3 p.m.
- Last minute effort—set up additional phone calls.

10. **ELECTION NIGHT**—Be certain people know where the results can be obtained, keep the media posted. Have tally sheets available—people like to be involved.

11. **ELECTION STATEMENTS**—Have ready for the press. Have district spokesmen ready with scripts for recordings or live coverage—WIN OR LOSE. Don't try to make up statements in the turmoil of election eve. **Anticipate the best and the worst and be prepared.**

12. **EVALUATE YOUR ELECTION PROCEDURE**—Study your election data and see what it tells you. You will see your strengths and your weaknesses. You will see where you should place your efforts in a total district communication program for the next 12 months.

# Winning Voter Approval: How Two Districts Did It

During 1976-77, several school districts across the nation had to close their doors. School districts in Ohio and Oregon, from the smallest to the largest, were the focus of national media coverage as operating levy election after operating levy election failed and school districts shut down due to lack of funds. School administrators and boards of education had been warning their communities about the crisis in school financial support. For some reason, though, voters did not or would not believe that their lack of support at the polls could close down their schools. Many held to the belief that state legislatures would never let that happen. But state help did not come in most places: the school doors closed and the children went home.

Perhaps these shutdowns were one of the causes of a voter turnaround in the fall of 1977-78, when voter approval was gained on the third and fourth election attempts. Projected school closings were cited as a key point in successful elections in Salem, Ore., and Toledo, Ohio—but they were **not** the sole reason. In both instances, it was a redoubling of effort—a total, all-out community effort, involving all key publics like schools, churches, business, industry and labor—that spelled final victory at the polls.

## Salem, Ore.

Deborah Johnson, director of public information in the Salem schools, lists the closures there as the overriding factor for success at the polls in the fall of 1977, after three failures during 1976-77. But she points out that had the fourth campaign not been well planned and organized—the media coverage positive, factual and thorough—the levy could have been defeated again. She lists these "reasons" for success:

- **The timing of the election at the start of the school year**—the threat of school closures and the detrimental effects on students turned the election tide to a positive vote.

- **A well planned and executed campaign**—using:

  ✓ *Speakers bureau*—including professional speech training;
  ✓ *News coverage and advertising* on TV and radio and in newspapers;

✓ *High spirited student efforts;*

✓ *Lawn signs and a literature drop out in the community;*

✓ *High school seniors going door to door* speaking to senior citizens, community residents and the media about the problems;

✓ *Commitment and involvement by staff members* and a broad base of community opinion leaders;

✓ *Constant and thorough media coverage* informing the voters on the major budget concerns and on the consequences of a levy defeat.

- **Selection of co-chairpersons for the campaign**—the secretary-treasurer of the local cannery union and a highly respected community leader who was a retired teacher.

- **A citizens steering committee**—that drew from opinion leaders on a wide base. The committee included a minister, senior citizen, state worker, banker, prison administrator, parent, educational union president, school administrator, the local labor union secretary-treasurer and a retired teacher.

It should also be noted that a major contributing factor to campaign unity was provided by the fact that the Salem Board of Education and the Salem Education Assn. (teacher bargaining unit) had reached a settlement for the 1977-78 school year, so both the staff and the board fully supported the election.

## Toledo (Ohio) Public Schools

The Toledo (Ohio) Public Schools won approval of an operating levy in November 1977, after four turn-downs over a two-year period. But why would people who had consistently turned down school funds and who were angry about additional property taxes decide they would pay an additional tax for the schools?

Kay Quealy, director of informational services in Toledo, cites three reasons why district administrators think the fourth election was approved:

1. **Pride in the city finally asserted itself**—Toledo had received nationwide publicity as a city which was failing to support its public schools.

2. **Hard work**—although board members, school people and parents had worked very hard in previous elections, also.

3. **The crucial factor**—the wholehearted support of business, industry, labor, media, churches and real estate firms.

Quealy notes that "although the media had supported all previous efforts to gain support for the schools, and business and industry had supported it to a point, support from some areas had been only token in previous elections.

"Now business and industry were seeing their own interests threatened," she said. "Companies were finding it hard to transfer employes to Toledo because the schools were going to close; some jobs were lost; real estate salespersons were finding it hard to sell a house in the Toledo school district. And with a school closing in prospect, contributions to civic and religious agencies were dropping."

Toledo's financial situation had been confirmed in 1976 and again in 1977 by the state auditor, who set the date on which the money would run out. But early in 1977, the Toledo Board of Education asked the Citizens Committee for Effective Government, an ad hoc committee which works under the auspices of the Toledo Area Governmental Research Assn., to do an in-dept study of all aspects of the Toledo schools.

The report was released that October. It confirmed the financial dilemma, and also spoke to many other aspects of education. It recommended the amount to be sought at the polls, although it admitted that amount was not enough to do the job as it should be done. It recommended cuts which are now under consideration.

But the Toledo schools did not escape closing that year. They closed on Oct. 28—the day the money ran out—with the promise they would re-open the day after the election if an emergency levy, which permitted borrowing during the present calendar year, was approved. The fact that students were out of school on election day probably helped the levy to pass, Quealy said, and it should not be overlooked that many students worked hard for its passage.

Over the last several years, Toledo administrators have taken a leading role in securing greater school support from the Ohio legislators. But school support is still a problem. Many Ohio districts have faced what Toledo did, although Toledo was the largest district to actually close the schools. Throughout the campaign, it was emphasized that the 6.1 mills Toledo sought were only to take care of the present situation, until the state legislature does something to improve support for public schools.

Chapter 9.

# Dealing With Special Problems

One thing is certain. *All* school systems have problems. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of different kinds, and they vary in size and intensity. But they are definitely there. And the school district that pretends they aren't is in trouble with its community already.

Eventually, most trouble will surface. And like garbage, the longer it has been covered up, the worse it will smell.

That is why all school districts should have detailed plans not only for communicating problems frankly and objectively to the community, but for telling the community, forthrightly, what they are going to do about them.

Such a procedure instills public confidence. The lack of one invites public scorn.

## DISCIPLINE

Perhaps, year in and year out, there is no greater problem than discipline in the classrooms of America. Just about every year, people across the country tell the Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education that discipline is their foremost educational concern.

Teachers and administrators wring their hands over the problem of discipline in cities and suburbia alike. Long thought to be a "city" problem, discipline, or the lack of it, now transcends classes, races and geography.

So what do you do? How do you involve the public and assure them that steps are being taken to overcome the problem? How do you admit the problem and begin to deal with it before the community demands that you do? And how do you involve them in the solution?

## How One City Handles It

One answer, according to Philadelphia Schools Supt. Michael P. Marcase, is a process that will provide each school building with its own discipline code.

The key to the new process in Philadelphia is a 69-page working document used by the board of education, school district staff, parents, students and community groups to forge new school discipline codes.

The document, "Discipline in the Philadelphia Public Schools," is a compilation, under a single cover, of all the many existing school district discipline policies and procedures. Some date back more than 20 years. Never before have they all been compiled in one place.

The discipline document was geared:

- ✓ To retain and re-emphasize sound principles of good teaching and good control;
- ✓ To place all disciplinary policies and guidelines in one convenient reference source;
- ✓ To provide suggestions for dealing with all types of disruptive behavior confronting the total staff in schools today;
- ✓ To suggest strategies for dealing with the overall problem of discipline in schools with respect to the changing parameters in which staff must function;
- ✓ To re-emphasize the need for shared commitment and responsibility by all who have a role to play in education in schools.

Each school in the system reviewed the document with its staff, students, parents and community in a series of meetings. The purpose was two-fold: to gain a solid understanding of general school district discipline policies, and to use the district's policies to put together specific discipline policies for each school in the city.

"We have a large city," Marcase said. "Different schools have different problems. Different staffs and parents and communities may want to pursue discipline in different ways. As long as the individual school policies are not counter to overall board policy, we will support each and every one of them.

"The important thing," he continued, "is that we get everyone thinking, planning and implementing discipline. Discipline can be a state of mind. We certainly don't want to be oppressive—nor would the courts permit us to be—but we do want everyone in the school family to be fully aware of the fact that discipline promotes order, and order forms the bedrock of a good, solid, basic education."

Marcase concludes: "There is no simple solution to the discipline problems in our schools, nor is there a magic formula for success in dealing with disruption. The problems of violence and disruption are people problems. Their causes are deep-rooted and stem from many sources both within and outside of the school. The long-range solution to these problems will require personnel who have developed the skills and strategies to identify and remediate the causes of disruption.

"The School District of Philadelphia is committed to the goal of safe schools and an orderly process of instruction. This commitment requires that everyone, members of the board of education, central office personnel, school administrator, teacher, parent and student, assumes his or her share of responsibility toward the attainment of that goal. To do otherwise would be a great disservice to the young people of our community."

The moral of this story: if you have a discipline problem in your school and if the community is concerned about it, involve everyone in the solution—students, staff, parents and community members.

## VIOLENCE

The need for better defined codes of discipline in the nation's schools is an end result. One of the prime causes is an alarming increase of violence in the classroom, as graphically revealed by Sen. Birch Bayh, D-Ind., in the release of a preliminary report of his subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency.

His survey, Bayh said, produced "a ledger of violence confronting our schools that reads like a casualty list from a war zone or a vice squad annual report." He added: "Far too often, youngsters arriving at our public schools today are faced with an environment dominated by fear, destruction and chaos rather than reading, writing and arithmetic." Teachers quickly discover "that the primary concern in many modern American schools is no longer education but preservation," he concluded.

The senator's conclusions were based on answers to a survey of 516 school districts with enrollments of 10,000 or more pupils. The subcommittee also concluded from the survey:

- School-related homicides have increased by 18.5%.
- Robberies have increased by 36.7%.
- Rapes and attempted rapes have increased by 40.1%.
- Assaults on students have increased by 85.3%.
- Assaults on teachers have increased by 77.4%.
- Burglaries of school buildings have increased by 11.8%.
- Drug and alcohol offenses on school property have increased by 37.5%.
- Dropouts have increased by 11.7%.
- The number of weapons confiscated by school authorities has increased by 54.4%.

Yet, says Robert Hilldrup, writing in the *Journal of Educational Communication*, "Too many school system and even college and university executives seem to think this is something that can't or won't happen to them. And if it does, the answer too often is a mad dash for security guards, metal detectors and mass suspensions."

Hilldrup, a former teacher, education editor and columnist and now publications administrator for the Richmond (Va.) Public Schools, contends that "these measures are reactions, not actions." The time is now, he says, "to look at the PR implications of school violence, to admit that it can happen in your school system and to start thinking negatively in order to do something positively about it."

And Hilldrup has some blunt advice.

First, he says, you have to expect the problem and plan to meet it head on. He adds:

One of the first aspects of the planning process, Hilldrup advises, is to talk with the police. "This," he says, "is a badly overlooked area. Don't be too proud to talk to the cops. They don't want to take over education. They have enough problems. But they are willing to help. They will make security checks of school buildings to point out unsafe areas. They probably know a good bit about who is pushing or using hard or soft drugs and where. Get their advice. Establish communication with them before the needs of crisis arrive. Have a high ranking contact in the police department so you can decide who will make what statement to whom after an incident happens."

Next, Hilldrup says, move quickly to involve appropriate parent groups and establish ground rules with the news media.

His advice for dealing with parents:

> The boards or executive committees of your district-wide parents' organizations should be kept informed that you are making contingency plans. Emphasis should be on keeping a low profile, but parents should be reminded that the primary responsibility for the attitude a child brings to school comes from the home.
>
> Principals, in messages to the parent, should stress at the individual school level parental responsibility for attitudes and actions by pupils. Suspension and expulsion rules should be reviewed internally for conformance with the latest court decisions and both parents and pupils should be informed of these.

There must also be guidelines for dealing with the media in times of violence in the schools, Hilldrup says. He suggests the following:

- An incident in a school will probably involve a violation of law. The police are in charge of crime scenes and crime sites. Statements involving evidence or potential testimony should be cleared through the police. Photographers should not be allowed on a crime scene without prior police agreement, but the media needs to know you will help them get photos of some type just as soon as possible.

- School employes should be told that if they have knowledge of an incident they do not have to make a statement to the media unless they wish to do so.

- Reporters **should not** be allowed to interview pupils on school property about an incident, particularly when the pupils are very young. Conversely, you should not attempt to interfere with news media attempts to interview anyone, pupil or otherwise, once they have left the control and responsibility of the school.

With this kind of pre-planning, Hilldrup says, a violent act in the schools will not come as a violent shock to your community or an indictment of your school or system.

# VANDALISM

As violence is a problem during the day, so is vandalism at night.

Vandalism itself costs school districts across the country more than $100 million a year. Related activities, like burglary and fire, mushroom the figure to more than $600 million.

Broken windows in schools have become an epidemic. Damage includes flag poles and computers, toilets and turf, thermostats and drainspouts; in short, just about anything connected with a school.

Yet, here again there is an answer. It is community involvement. There is little argument anymore that one of the keys to an effective campaign on the mounting losses incurred by schools in the rising tide of vandalism is the development of a good working relationship with the community. At the very least, everyone in the school and the community should be made aware of what vandalism costs in decreasing faith in the educational system, increasing cost for repairs and security measures and the corresponding decrease in available funds for other necessary school services.

But more than awareness is needed to combat the problem of vandalism. And, again, proper planning is the answer; planning which involves staff, students, parents, community leaders and law enforcement agencies.

School districts across the country report the following steps in successful anti-vandalism campaigns:

- **Analyze and define the problem.** The first step must be the development of sufficient data to define the problem. This means a specific district policy on reporting ALL incidents. Ignoring the problem will not cause it to go away. Actual dollar losses due to vandalism in a district are almost never as disastrous as the "grapevine" or the media can come up with through multiplication of a single fact.

- **Establish a clearly defined district policy for reporting incidents** complete with a standard form. Such a paper helps provide accurate information, and is of immeasurable help in explaining what actually occurred. And after the policy is developed with the aid of administrators, support staff teachers and the school board, make sure it is disseminated to all personnel in the district.

- **Let the community IN on your concerns.** Establish either a school- or district-wide citizens advisory committee to work with you in developing plans, programs and policies that will help to reduce or eliminate the problem. Make your appeal personal. The letter might say: "Are you aware that vandalism in your public schools cost the county taxpayers $191,000 last year? That's enough to hire 21 to 25 more teachers or renovate one school or buy 28 new buses." The letter might enlist the aid of residents in reducing "the waste of our tax dollars on vandalism."

- **Encourage parents to talk with their children about the effects of vandalism** on their education. And encourage parents to notify the school of rumors or threats of vandalism or violence that their children report to them.
- **Establish a policy in which parents become financially respon-**
- **Establish a good working relationship with the local law enforcement agencies.** This means the consistent and accurate reporting of incidents and damages; as well as marking all school property to facilitate recovery following a theft.
- **Institute a neighborhood watch system.** Enlist the aid of the school's neighbors in reporting all suspicious movements around school grounds as soon as they are noted. Try to guarantee anonymity to insure more cooperation.
- **Form a parent patrol,** with school property marked with signs reading "This school is protected by community residents and the parent patrol." Under this plan, parents are encouraged to drive slowly by and around the school grounds during time periods (nights, weekends, vacations) when the premises are ordinarily unoccupied. This approach can be particularly effective since the visits are unpredictable in comparison with a regular school security patrol.
- **Establish with the local law enforcement agency a special number** which community members can call when they spot suspicious activity around a school.
- **Hold a series of informal briefings with community residents** on the school's problems and ask them for suggestions. If the problem in your school is particularly severe, be sure to explain to parents what you are currently doing, what the role of a security force is (or will be), what procedures you have established to deal with a serious incident, and what plans you have for the future.

# DECLINING ENROLLMENT

Back in the 1960s, students were hanging out the windows, a broom closet with any size at all was used as a classroom, school officials were planning all kinds of new educational facilities, and it seemed the baby boom would never end.

But what a difference a decade makes.

For along came "the pill" and then tight money and unemployment and inflation, and by the early 1970s the baby boom was nothing more than a fizzle. By the mid-'70s, school boards were laying off teachers, watching state subsidies fade away, and trying, with crash helmets at the ready, to close down long-standing neighborhood schools.

Unfortunately, they were closing the schools, or attempting to, more often than not, without proper planning, communication, or community involvement; school officials who pushed the panic button were ill prepared for the heat of the blast that followed, many times giving up in full retreat.

Yet other districts, which acted on a logical plan and communicated that plan to the community, got by with hardly a scratch on their reserve of goodwill.

In its publication, *Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space*, the Educational Facilities Laboratories (EFL) presents such a plan, which has been used successfully by many school districts throughout the country. It contains the essential steps in reaching a justifiable decision on how to deal with enrollment declines:

- A set of **agreed-on goals,** with specific objectives for each.

- A **factual base** defining the "givens" upon which the plan can be developed. In the case of a plan for facility use, this base includes enrollments and their projections; schools, their location, capacity and general level of adequacy; community changes affecting the location of people and the composition of their groupings; and a "picture" of the physical structure of the district. Cost data on new construction and/or renovation may also be required.

- An **analysis** of the factual data. This is an exercise in fitting the numbers—pupils and schools—together and of arranging them in their physical setting.

- A set of **possible solutions:** alternative grade organizations, patterns of school use, abandonment for outmoded and/or unsafe schools and needed new construction or closings (or both).

- **A choice among alternatives** for a preferred course of action; a justification for the alternative selected; the preparation of the time sequence for the action to be taken; and a cost analysis of the implications of the selected plan as against alternative options.

The second step is perhaps the most critical element—gathering a factual base for proceeding toward a decision. William Keough and Katherine Eisenberger developed a "facilities usage criteria test" for assessing a school's potential for closing, which appeared in *Declining Enrollment: What To Do,* published by the American Assn. of School Administrators.

Closing a school would mean:

1. Keeping students relatively close to their neighborhood.
2. Keeping students from crossing major physical barriers.
3. Maintaining a similar socioeconomic, racial and ethnic mix.
4. Closing the school with the lowest enrollment.
5. Closing the oldest school with the weakest academic performance record.
6. Closing the least educationally flexible building.
7. Closing the "high-cost" maintenance/capital outlay building.
8. Closing a building that can be recycled.
9. Closing the building that requires the **least** additional cost in districtwide transportation.
10. Closing the building most in keeping with the recommendations of the district's task force on declining enrollment.

The task force—or citizens advisory committee or study group—is the most widely used and successful format for arriving at a set of alternatives from which the final decision is made. It brings together representatives of various community groups who study the facts, discuss their concerns and try to arrive at a consensus on several options that would solve the problems and be acceptable to those affected.

Those who serve on such panels learn how difficult a process it is. They have an opportunity to review all the data and gather information on their own. They serve as a link between the school board and administration and the community, verifying the need for a decision and the complexity of trying to weigh all interests and be fair to all concerned. If they are truly representative and not chosen to endorse preconceived conclusions, and if their work is used—as it should be—as the basis for the board's decision, the charge of unilateral action can be avoided. The task force can take a great deal of the heat off both the board and the district administration. It can provide a rational approach to a highly emotional problem.

The task force approach also points up the absolute need of involving the public in the school closing problem.

*Declining Enrollment,* published by the National School Public Relations Assn., puts it this way:

> Life would be considerably easier for school administrators and school board members if decisions about declining enrollment could be made solely on the basis of objective considerations. At first glance, closings, consolidations, reorganizations and other possible solutions appear to be administrative decisions based on the facts.
>
> Finding a solution, however, is not a "numbers game." Solutions will affect people. They will affect them at their most vulnerable, most emotional points—their children and their pocketbooks. Declining enrollment is a human problem.
>
> A school may be a facility—an administrative statistic on a central-office wall map. In a community, it is a place where children learn, make friends and grow. It is a focal point of parental and community involvement and activity. It is a place where people work, interact, develop careers and attain status. Its presence is a symbol of the vitality of a neighborhood and an asset to the property values.
>
> The involvement of the public is essential. Decisions from administrative offices and board rooms announced with finality to staff and community will have predictable results. Not only will the resistance be strong, but there is likely to be a move to change the people occupying those administrative offices and board rooms. Superintendents and board members who have lost their positions because of dissatisfaction with the way they handled declining enrollment grow in number by the year.

Given the problem and the need for a solution, involvement of those affected has a twofold benefit. First, it allows for discussion and appraisal of a diversity of ideas and approaches. Second, it becomes an educational process by which those affected learn the limits of making decisions that will both solve the problem and be acceptable to all concerned.

## Nostalgia Night

In the Butler (Pa.) Area Schools, the school board countered community resentment at the planned closing of the old Broad Street School with a "Nostalgia Night."

Says the school district's coordinator of school/community relations, Peg Dumbaugh: "The people had both a right and a need to express their feelings. After all, Broad Street had served generations of Butlerites for 79 years; and strong emotions were aroused at the thought of its destruction. Why not, then, give people an opportunity to express those emotions in a positive, therapeutic way?"

**The Process:** First, the faculty and staff of the school were involved in choosing a suitable date in late May. Through news releases, the community was asked to contribute pictures and other momentoes for a display. Retired teachers, through their organization, were invited to participate, particularly those who had taught at Broad Street.

The PTA agreed to supply refreshments for the evening, and the children began making decorations. Even the mayor and city council cooperated by declaring the last week in May Broad Street School Week. Downtown merchants also supported the project by running a Nostalgia Night logo in their ads.

Finally May 28 arrived. The display of pictures was impressive, the building was decorated, the refreshments were ready, and the weather was perfect. But would the community come? The whole idea, after all, had really been a gamble.

The response was overwhelming. According to Dumbaugh, more than 500 people of all ages jammed the small elementary school. They came by bus, car, cab and on foot. Many carried their old report cards and pictures with them to share with friends. PTA members ran out of refreshments and rushed out for more. People were reluctant to leave and sat for hours exchanging memories.

Opposition to the demolition of the school literally ended that evening. Nostalgia Night allowed people to focus on their nostalgia. It was a combination community block party and old-fashioned family reunion. The people who contributed to the displays and otherwise helped make Nostalgia Night such a tremendous success received special letters of invitation to attend Open House at the New Broad Street School in the fall.

## Accepting Defeat Gracefully

Similarly, the Montgomery Hills Junior High School, Silver Spring, Md., accentuated the positive and called its demise "Goin' Out in Style."

When the closing decision was announced, according to Carl Smith, principal, the school's administrative staff made an immediate resolve to accept the decision gracefully and to accent the positive. The long-range goal was the welfare of the students. The immediate objective was to send students out in June to their new schools with confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed in the new schools, and with a positive orientation toward those schools. An all-school and all-community campaign was launched:

1. A theme and a slogan, "Goin' Out in Style," were developed and a mascot designed which portrayed an older Mohawk (the Mohawk is the school mascot) with a hobo pack on his back, preparing to move on. Buttons portraying the theme were ordered—enough to give students, staff and interested parents. When they arrived, they were initially given only to staff to wear for a two-week period. The aim was to build interest in the idea. The students received their buttons at the campaign's kick-off assembly.

2. The campaign emphasized two elements:

   - Aim to do the unexpected. For example, at the traditional Christmas music assembly, three Santas (the principal, assistant principal and counselor) suddenly appeared and gave candy canes to every student. (It brought the house down!)

   - Each "last" event was celebrated, e.g., the last Christmas dance, the last home basketball game, etc., not in mourning, but as a tribute to the school and in memory of over 10,000 students who had graduated from Montgomery Hills.

3. A planning committee consisting of teachers, students and parents was organized. Their first task was to plan a kick-off assembly. The

second was to plan and coordinate a calendar of special events extending over the second semester of the school year. Ideas were solicited from students, staff and parents.

4. In January, two months after the closing decision, the kick-off assembly was held. The cheerleaders and band led the assembly. A major event was teaching students the words and music to the school's new song—"Goin' Out in Style"—sung to the tune of "This Land Is Your Land." The assembly was very successful.

5. The press was invited to attend the kick-off assembly. A reporter and photographer from the Board of Education also covered it for the Jan. 26 issue of the *MCPS Bulletin*. Later, a local television station did a human interest story during their evening news program.

6. Examples of other events include an International Night Festival, inter-school visits for students to visit their new schools, special historical issues of the student newspaper, special class trips, Alumni Night, and special graduation exercises.

**The Result:** Morale among staff and students continued to be high; vandalism was reduced, as the students took pride in their school, especially in its last days; participation in extra-curricular activities and school spirit were increased significantly.

## Mergers Are Tricky, Too!

Sometimes, declining enrollment dictates a merger between two existing schools. And that can be a touchy problem, too, particularly if the schools have been long-time rivals in adjoining communities.

Just such a problem faced Donald Matz, principal of the Maplewood High School in Townville, Pa. He describes it: "The rivalry between schools to be merged was extremely intense. As in many rural areas, the schools and their activities were the center of community interest. Each community felt that its school and traditions were the best. It was necessary to develop a PR plan for combating these feelings and creating new traditions and policies. The plan developed was designed to gain the confidence of the student who would, in turn, influence the parent."

His advice on dealing with the problem:

- Keep the students informed. They are the ones most affected by any change. Establish committees for all joint activities.

- Establish a program of gradually combining facets of both school operations so that students of both schools have opportunities to be together.

- Combine the athletic programs and other activities. Make sure that coaches and sponsors appointed to these positions understand the past traditions of both schools. Try to develop a winning attitude on the athletic teams and other performing organizations. A winning team or a super band will not only unite the students, but will give the parents something to be proud of.

- Select personnel for coaching positions carefully. The last thing you want is a coach who is going to divide the community.

- Hold joint meetings to plan combined proms, parties and dances.

- Establish student committees with equal representation to design class rings, graduation announcements, yearbooks, etc.

- Seniors from both schools should plan the graduation ceremony.

- Choose student leaders wisely. Make sure that neither school feels it is not being represented. Appoint coleaders if necessary until all students are under one roof.

- Plan as many combined school functions such as pep rallies, band concerts, etc., as can be arranged without totally disrupting the educational program.

- Within the constraints of the teacher contract and tenure laws, transfer teachers according to their preference if it can be done. The teacher will be happier and will do a better job if placed in his or her chosen situation.

- Do inform the students, parents and teachers via newsletters, open house meetings or other media of progress being made and what to expect.

- Follow up rumors and make sure they are corrected if necessary.

- Keep in mind that even after all plans are finalized and thoroughly explained some parents will still be disgruntled. A continued positive PR campaign extolling the virtues of the merger is a must, even after the merger occurs.

## RELEASING TEST SCORES

One problem that still strikes fear into the hearts of many superintendents and boards of education across the country is the release of standardized test results. For the results of educational assessment programs provide a yardstick, a device not only to measure the success of a school or a school district, but also to compare that school or that district to another one not very far away. And the comparison can be very embarrassing.

A recent handbook by the National School Public Relations Assn. on releasing test scores says: "At the local school district level, the quality of assessment communication to parents, staff members, community leaders and other important publics has been generally sub-par, even non-existent."

The handbook continues:

> For the school district, and even the local school itself, assessment can be a no-win situation no matter how the scores turn out. If they're low, community reaction is predictable (What's wrong?). If they're high, the immediate question may be, "How come they weren't higher?" In other words, whatever the situation, it is very risky to release test scores without first preparing the community.
>
> Some educators have argued forcefully that assessment test scores are an insignificant measure of student achievement. (Such arguments generally follow the presentation of low scores.) This cop-out approach to assessment just doesn't work. As far as the outside world is concerned, tests wouldn't be used if they didn't mean anything. So, on the premise that the scores are important to everybody, begin your dissemination efforts by analyzing your publics and understanding what the scores mean to each of them.

The handbook gives some solid, basic advice on the handling of the entire problem. Among the advice:

### Dissemination Begins at Home

The dissemination plan, like charity, should begin at home. Before alerting the media, make sure the staff—and that means all school employes—understands what student assessment is and what the resulting scores mean. Reporters have been known to zero in immediately on a school whose scores were particularly high—or low. The principal or teachers who shrug off the interviewer with an "Oh, we're not worried about that Mickey Mouse program" will undercut whatever communication efforts are made by the central office (or the immediate district or the state).

The staff component of dissemination planning should begin months before the tests are given. At that time, all members of the staff should be informed about the nature of the educational assessment program, what the tests are supposed to show and what they will not show, and what will be done with the results. Be sure that when the scores are released, the staff will know where they came from and what they mean.

When test results become available, another staff briefing should be conducted before scores are presented to the media. Think how your faculty would feel if they first read about the scores in the newspapers.

However, the scores themselves should not be given to staff members so early that results will be gossiped about and leaked out before you're ready for the media. The task is to develop a timeline that provides a logical dissemination sequence and gets the test data in the hands of staff as rapidly as possible. After all, the purpose of assessment is to provide information that will help teachers improve instruction. This basic fact alone should dictate placing teachers early in the dissemination timeline.

Following the staff briefings, each principal can begin individual efforts to inform the school community. Then the central office can call a news conference and put the district newsletter to press. Ideally, it can all happen within a week. Utopia would be for each school to make its report to its community coincide with the district-wide release, because the real credibility lies at the local school level.

## First, the Staff

As soon as the scores are available, the central office should hold a detailed briefing for principals. This should include an explanation of the entire program and a thorough analysis of the results, complete with charts and tables. The principals become, in effect, the first line of PR, because they must go back to their schools to conduct detailed briefings of their own. So before they leave, they should be well-versed in the facts as well as the PR "line" the district wants to take.

Now, it's the principals' turn to take the explanations, the charts, and the peptalks back to their schools and conduct similar sessions for their staffs. And this doesn't mean just the faculty, either. The secretary who answers the phone and the custodian who chats with his neighbor in the barber shop are also part of the school family. They cannot be ignored.

They should not be expected, of course, to master all the educational implications of the scores, but they should have a general picture and understand the significance and purpose of assessment. Remember, to neighbors and casual acquaintances, they work for the school, and consequently their opinions carry a lot of authority in their social groups. The principal, therefore, should give the entire school staff a general briefing, outlining the major implications so that if any employe is confronted by a citizen in the supermarket, he or she will be able to respond confidently.

> *"Yes, we've already made plans to beef up our reading instruction, but generally we were pretty pleased with the results." (Note that when they're involved in a program, it's "we." When they're left out, more often than not, it's "they.")*

The teachers, however, need and should want a deeper understanding of the testing program and its ramifications to prepare them for the parents who want to know what all this means to their children. If the scores are below average, does this mean theirs is a "bad" school? How do their children's scores compare with the school's or the district's? Once again, the teacher can destroy the credibility of the entire program if he or she responds, "Oh, we don't pay any attention to that sort of thing" or "Test scores don't mean anything." To parents, test scores mean a lot. They represent concrete evidence. They "show" whether kids are learning or not learning. Downplaying their importance will only sound like an effort to evade responsibility, and it will backfire.

If the scores are low, everybody shouldn't sit around wringing their hands, but should think in terms of what can be done to bring them up. If they're high, the public relations problem is considerably lessened, but this should not be a cue to take bows. Staff response, rather, should be in terms of what they intend to do to keep them high.

## Next, the Media

Once the schools and their staffs are squared away, the next step should be to release the results to the media.

Like it or not, it is the media in most communities that transmits, and more important, **interprets,** your test results to the public. Certainly, parents are concerned, on an individual basis, about the test scores for their own children, but it is the media which paints the **big picture** for the community. Thus, if you are going to get fair and objective treatment on test results, you must be prepared to work with the media. If you're not prepared, you're asking for trouble.

But why release test scores at all? Because, as is so painfully apparent in society today, anything you try to withhold, cover up, or hedge on in any way is viewed far more critically by the media and the public when it is eventually uncovered. If you don't release test scores publicly now, the pressure will grow because so many other school systems across the country do release test results, and people will eventually begin to ask, if they aren't already, **what have you got to hide?** And if you continue to hold out, it's almost as sure as death and taxes that someone eventually will "leak" the results, together with his or her own interpretation, or maybe worse, with no interpretation at all.

So the key is to learn how to work with the news media as your key to full, frank, honest and objective dissemination of test results.

Yet, that kind of reporting cannot be accomplished through a half-hour news conference once a year, where you try to explain the tests, the testing process, the results and the language of testing all at once. It must be accomplished through an on-going school district program to familiarize reporters with every aspect of the testing process and the district's educational program.

NSPRA's handbook on releasing test results offers some tips for the superintendent conducting the press conference at which the results are released: "The administrator who is schooled in the ways of media has a brief summary prepared and hands it out to the reporters, even before he gives them the test reports. He does not read from the summary. He reviews it verbally.

"On the whole," he may say, "we are very pleased with the results of the assessment program. The report does, however, point up some weaknesses, such as in fifth-grade reading and seventh-grade arithmetic. Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, as soon as we received these results we went right to work in these areas. We've got specialists working in the elementary and junior high schools to get to the roots of these problems and solve them."

In 30 seconds, the superintendent has taken all the ammunition out of the reporters' guns and set the stage for a positive approach. The school system, it turns out, is taking all this in stride, has the situation well in hand, and is pleased to share it with the world.

Please note it was the superintendent who took charge of the news conference, not the public relations officer or testing director. The superintendent can and should defer to the experts when the questions get technical, but the superintendent is the spokesperson the media wants. If he/she is not there, and even if the other officials acquitted themselves admirably, the media will still want comments from the superintendent.

## ENTER THE PUBLIC

Now you have to brace for the impact of the news on your external publics.

At this stage the parents take their questions to the school staff. They may even ask their children, so a smart principal won't overlook that audience either.

Think how much a parent's mind would be eased if 12-year-old Jimmy would come home and say, "We got our test scores back today and our teacher said we did pretty well except in arithmetic so we worked on a lot of problems and I think I understand it better." Scratch one worried mother.

For the most part, however, the schools will feel the impact of parent concerns, while the central office will get it from the rest of the community and perhaps even from local government officials. And it won't take long to find out how well you did in your public relations planning. If you did a good job, expect things to be quiet. But if you didn't, the phone will ring off the hook.

## STRIKES

It has been said many times and in many ways.

The American Assn. of School Administrators (AASA), in its handbook, *Work Stoppage Strategies*, says succinctly:

> In a school strike, which side prevails will largely be determined by which side of the issue most effectively conveys its message to the community.

Across the country, Robert F. Savitt, superintendent of schools in the Plainview-Old Bethpage (N.Y.) Central School District, sees it much the same:

> There are many horror stories that can be told of the unpreparedness of school districts to handle crises that develop when a negotiations impasse occurs or a teachers' strike takes place. Because of the unpreparedness of school authorities to handle such a crisis situation, teacher groups in many instances have been able to gain public support and back school boards to the wall because they have developed a very careful game plan for communicating with the public. The development of a detailed set of administrative and communication procedures, set up weeks or months in advance of negotiations, is the best insurance against the confusion and chaos that come when poor communication procedures are put into effect at the last minute.

Louise Stoll, director and past president of the Berkeley (Calif.) Unified School District school board, puts it this way:

> The board image of integrity, responsible leadership and devotion providing good education for children is easily tarnished in a labor dispute. A just settlement depends as much on the board's ability to project an image of reasonableness and integrity as on the soundness of its fiscal positions. Yet, an examination of public sector labor disputes reveals an appealing failure of the public employer to adequately communicate its position—prior to, during and after a strike.

It is no secret, then, that communication plays perhaps the single most vital role in the complexities and emotions of a school strike. Good communication can help prevent a strike, it can help bring order out of chaos during a strike, or it can be the adhesive that puts the broken pieces back together again after the strike is over.

The dictionary defines the word communicate, "to impart knowledge of; make known." Communicating sounds simple, and it should be. But anyone who has been caught in the middle of the whirlpool that is a school strike knows from sad experience that the simple act of communicating just isn't simple anymore.

Communicating effectively is seldom easy; it requires planning, effort, understanding and follow-through. Communicating effectively in the tense atmosphere which often surrounds a crisis requires redoubled effort, greater understanding and increased attention to proper planning.

As Billings, Mont., principal H.C. Christiansen told a seminar session on school strikes at a recent convention of the National Assn. of Elementary School Principals:

**You'd better be prepared. It can happen anywhere.**

So from the beginning of negotiations, plenty of intensive planning should be going into a procedure to communicate accurately, clearly and quickly with the media, staff, parents and community in case of an impasse.

For in all but those Utopian situations where management and union amicably reach a settlement, shake hands and live happily ever after, somewhere along the line the management negotiating team will inevitably have to take its case to the public.

It may come in answer to the union's public relations campaign; it may come by order of the board of education when a strike is inevitable;

or it may come after pressure from the community to let them know where things stand. No matter the impetus, it will almost always come.

## Taking Your Case to the Public

Talking to the Philadelphia Public Relations Assn. shortly after Watergate broke wide open, United Press International White House Correspondent Helen Thomas said that former President Richard Nixon, in dealing with the press and the public, failed to realize that trying to restore one's credibility was just about the same as trying to restore one's virginity.

About the same time, David Rossie, education editor for the Binghamton (N.Y.) *Evening Press*, told a crisis communication seminar sponsored by the New York State School Boards Assn., "School boards that behave as if they have a lot to hide usually do."

The management negotiating team would do well to remember the advice of these two reporters as it plans to communicate its position to the community. The moral of both stories is, if you're going to go public, do it all the way. Be open and frank and fully truthful. Don't accentuate the positive and hide the negative, because the longer the negative is hidden, the worse it looks when it finally gets out in the open.

And the loss of credibility in the community will have a direct, adverse effect on that side's strength at the bargaining table.

## Dealing with the Media

Once the management team makes the decision to go to the media, several guidelines should be followed in communicating with members of the press, radio and TV:

- Don't tell them what to write. A school management spokesperson telling a reporter what he or she should report is just about the same as a reporter telling an educator how to educate. If you start brow beating the media, your communications campaign is sputtering already. Give the reporter the facts, the full facts, concerning management's position on the major negotiations issues. Give them honestly and frankly and leave it up to the reporter how to construct the story. It rarely will be written just the way you'd like it written—the reporter is trying to report objectively on both sides of the issues—but it usually will be written fairly.

- While a statement issued to reporters should be in writing to give both them and yourself a record of just what statement was issued, don't hesitate to answer reporters' questions about the statement. No one can put everything in one statement, and it is the reporter's job to ask questions to clarify every issue.

- Don't attempt to speak "off the record" unless asked to by the media. If a media person requests a background, off-the-record conference on a negotiations issue or issues, that's one thing. Oblige them. But don't stand up in front of media representatives, issue a statement and then tell them it's off the record. In this case, if they don't agree first to consider a statement or portion of it off the record, they have absolutely no obligation not to report what you say.

- Don't use jargon. You're not bargaining over multivariate cognitive and affective educational objectives. You're bargaining over a variety of educational programs. You're not hung up over the number of language arts supportive personnel. They're reading aides. Keep it simple and clear; short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.

- Be scrupulously accurate. Off-hand, unresearched, inaccurate remarks to the media will quickly come back over the bargaining table to haunt the negotiating team.

- Don't call the other side names. Regardless of the old "sticks and stones may break my bones" advice, names can hurt you, if you use them. When grown people start calling other grown people names, they lose credibility in the community, particularly if they are members of the board of education or top school officials who are supposed to know better. If you're baited, steer clear of the hook. A few words said publicly in anger can set bargaining back for days.

- Don't play favorites. Many school boards and superintendents have a favorite reporter. And that's fine if it helps in getting day-to-day school news in the paper or on the air during the regular school term. But if you start playing favorites during the clamor of news coverage of a major strike, the rest of the media will seek other sources—like the union leaders, for instance.

- Don't *ever* say, *"This is our final offer."* In bargaining there rarely is such a thing as a "final" offer. You know it, the media knows it and the teachers know it. More credibility is lost by boards of education through "final" offers than through just about any other bargaining ploy.

- Don't try to obtain publicity by pressure. If a newspaper or radio or TV station is independent and objective—and most are—NO ONE, outside of its own corporate management, and in some cases not even them, tells a news outlet what news to print or to broadcast. By trying to persuade someone with influence in your community to pressure the local news media into using your side of the negotiations or strike story, you are courting the very real possibility that you will be ignored, at best, or at worst, exposed for what you are trying.
- Above all, be honest, accurate, frank and friendly.

## Communicating with Parents and the Community

While the news media, in most cases, will be the quickest way to reach parents and the community during negotiations, it can not and must not be considered the only way.

For one thing, the media, by its nature, can use just a capsule of your negotiations position in its daily or weekly reports. Some specific points you might consider crucially important to parents and the community might be considered by the media not as newsworthy as some of the more immediate financial or political aspects of the negotiations process. Thus it may never see print or be presented on the air.

The answer, then, for parents and community, is a series of fact sheets presenting management's step-by-step view of the negotiations process.

These fact sheets should be just that—FACT sheets—not propaganda leaflets geared to pull the wool over the collective eyes of the community. You may fool all of the people some of the time, but propaganda will boomerang in the long run.

The key with parents and the community, as with the news media, is to stick to the facts on the issues at hand. Leave out opinions about the employe organizations, however tempted you may be to editorialize about their behavior, their personal attacks, or any other diversion planned to take the spotlight off issues like salaries, class size, length of the school day, extracurricular pay, preparation time and health and welfare benefits.

The public does not care what the school district's chief spokesperson thinks about the family background of the union's chief negotiator. They don't expect you to embrace him or her with open arms. But they do expect to be informed honestly and objectively about the issues that could lead to a strike.

Experience has shown that parents and community want the following kinds of information:

- ✓ What are the issues, and what is their financial impact on the pocketbook of the parent/taxpayer?
- ✓ What about the union's charge that by opposing their requests you're diminishing the quality of education offered to youngsters in the school district? If the board has its way in negotiations, how would the contract affect the quality of education?
- ✓ If there is a strike, will the schools be open? Will there be transportation and lunches? Will the children be safe? Might school buildings be closed at midday during a strike, sending children of working parents out on the street with no adult supervision?
- ✓ Who or where can a parent call to get up-to-the-minute information about the imminence of a strike?
- ✓ Can parents help out in the schools if there is a strike?

All right, but how do you get this information to parents?

It's a good question, and the first answer is how not to do it. And the one process that should be avoided is sending letters home with students. In essence, you're using the students against their teachers and the repercussions will be considerable.

It's like waving a red flag in the teacher association's face, inviting open resistance on the part of the classroom teacher and a confrontation you don't need any part of, particularly during what more than likely is a delicate time in the negotiations process.

The answer is the mails. Small school districts should have a list ready beforehand of every mailing address in the community, or at least of every household with children in the schools. A full set of mailing labels can be prepared ahead of time.

Larger school districts must have lists of all key communicators in the community: PTA officers, civic and community groups, block associations, community service groups, business leaders, bankers, politicians—and don't forget the "butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker"—just about anyone with an interest in the community and its schools.

When negotiations are at an impasse; when the teachers' association has gone public; whenever the board of education decides to take its case to the community: all these contacts must be fully informed by fact sheets that are, in fact, factual.

## Communicating with the Staff

When a strike is imminent, perhaps your most important communication must go to staff: to the staff directly affected by the strike as well as to the rest of the school district employes. They, above all, must know, concisely and clearly, the administration's position on the issues in contention.

Such a communiqué is imperative not only to clarify the administration's position on the issues, but to dispel whatever misinformation has been circulated about the conflict between union and management.

Yet, before management sits down to compose a message to its employes, it should have no delusions that the communique will prevent a strike by causing employes to rise up against their association leaders. Cases where this has happened are few and far between. Even if the majority of employes may not agree with their association's position on certain matters, they almost always will go along with that position as a show of strength in hopes of getting a better contract in the end.

Many a board of education has composed a glowing letter to its employes explaining how unjust the demands of the union leaders are, only to have the letter virtually ignored by employes taking part in a strike authorization vote.

Yet it is still important, in the long run, that every school district employe be fully and accurately informed of the positions separating management and the union.

But you can be certain that the board's communiqué to teachers will be suspect at best, and more than likely viewed as outright propaganda from the "bad guys" trying to take bread off the teachers' tables.

Thus, the following guidelines should be followed:

- **If you're thinking about threats and coercion, forget it.** To be effective at all, the content must be absolutely factual, low-key and nonthreatening. Don't threaten to fire anyone who strikes unless you mean to carry through. Threats like these have been made since teacher strikes began, but rarely have they been carried out. What they usually do is solidify the members behind the union leaders and make the rest of your communiqué meaningless.

- **Don't use editorials.** A strike may be illegal. If it is, say so. But don't call it "unconscionable," "demagogic," "ruthless," "power mad," "immoral," "scurrilous," or any other dollar-and-a-half words you can think of. Words like these rarely have any impact on employes fighting for their contractual lives, except perhaps to make them chuckle a little. If there is a state law prohibiting school employe strikes, cite it chapter and verse, but don't add your own subjective observations to it.

- **If you have rejected certain union demands that now form the principle strike issues, explain why.** Employes may be getting an entirely different story from their leaders. But don't bother to denounce union demands for a telephone in every lavatory. Everyone knows demands like this are made initially as grist for the bargaining mill. You're wasting your time remonstrating about them.

- **If you have a problem with the association and its leaders, don't tar all teachers with the same brush.** In the emotions of negotiating on the brink of a strike, things can get nasty on either side, but to castigate "teachers" in general for the actions of one or two union officials is to solidify, again, the members behind their leaders. If you feel it's necessary to "get tough" in your communiqué to staff, be careful to differentiate between the negotiators and the rest of the employes sitting home hoping and praying there won't be a strike.

- **Enumerate concessions management has already made.** Many times these are considerable, yet they get lost in the glare of the issues that are still unresolved.

- **Detail your "last" offer to the teachers' association** (remember there is no such thing as a "final" offer) and why, particularly financially, you feel you shouldn't go any further. Employes are taxpayers, too, and away from the heat of the negotiating table they can look objectively at the financial impact an inflated settlement would have on the community.

- **Remember to send the communiqué to all staff members, not just the employe group threatening to strike.** Other employe groups may make up their minds whether or not to cross picket lines from how you outline your position on the issues at impasse. You might include a cover letter too, letting the other employes know, in a non-threatening and matter-of-fact way, that they are expected to work in accordance with their contracts and with the policies of the school district if there is a strike.

- **Remember, too, that there is a fine line between being argumentative and setting the record straight.** Stay on the straight side even if it pains you to do so. The readers' reaction will depend largely on the tone of the communication. It doesn't pay to berate the honesty of the union leadership, complain about the unrealistic nature of their demands, or question their good faith in bargaining. The effect of those tactics will be just the opposite of what is desired.

## DESEGREGATION

Late in 1976, school administrators, teachers, parents and community leaders met in Denver, Colo., for three days to discuss successes in desegregation efforts across the country, to identify common ingredients, and to put together blueprints for communities where desegregation has an unfinished agenda.

It became evident at that meeting that despite the headlines and the battles and the burning of buses in some communities, desegregation had come amid relative peace and calm in others. **Once again, as is the trend throughout this book, planning, communication and community involvement were keys to the kingdom of success.**

The conference was sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education and the Council of Chief State School Officers in cooperation with the American Assn. of School Administrators, The Council of the Great City Schools, the National Assn. of State Boards of Education and the Education Commission of the States. It was coordinated by the National School Public Relations Assn. and it came up with the following recommendations for dealing constructively with the problems of desegregation:

## At the School District Level

### Ways To Develop Positive Parent and Community Attitudes

- The school board, superintendent and top administrative team must set the tone. They must convince parents they believe in desegregation. They must make a firm commitment to parental and community involvement, rather than giving it only "lip service" and, in reality, feeling threatened by such intervention onto their turf. Parents and the community must not be used to "rubber stamp" decisions that have been made at the top.

- Establish quick, clear, concise communication channels. School districts must mount a massive communication effort, either through their own communication personnel or through consultation with a professional public relations firm. In addition to handling the media, there must be communication with key community groups and business establishments, from banks and large corporations to gas stations, beauty parlors and neighborhood grocery stores. There must be a rumor-control center where a parent or other member of the community can get either an immediate answer or a quick return call on any question, problem or concern. Such a center should operate 24 hours a day, with recordings during non-working hours.

- Both districtwide and school task forces must be formed and informed—and must be representative of the community. They should be given specific responsibilities and a timetable and should be dealt with openhandedly and objectively.

- Assure both parents and the community that the quality of education will not be compromised by desegregation and that desegregated pupils will be safe in their schools. Sometimes a symbolic effort can be very significant, such as the school superintendent riding or driving buses during the first few days of desegregation.

- Work with and strengthen existing organizations, rather than "reinventing the wheel." Enlist the help of PTAs, church groups, ethnic organizations and community and civic associations.

- Consider using consultants skilled in community analysis to recommend the best ways to offer human relations training for existing community groups.

- Those responsible for schools must anticipate and develop a plan before one is mandated.

### Ways to Develop Positive Staff Attitudes

- Mandate and fund inservice training in human relations for all staff—professional and non-professional. However, again, the best influence on staff is by example. The school district leadership should firmly develop behavioral goals and objectives with the staff, and central office administrators should be highly visible in the schools during the desegregation process.

- School district policies should require that staffs be desegregated, preferably before student desegregation.

- The school administration must anticipate the problems that will be faced by the staff in dealing with desegregation and should have ready suggested solutions and materials that would be helpful. The central administration should have a human relations staff to coordinate inservice training and to help on individual problems.

- The staff must be involved in selecting and developing multiethnic, multiracial texts and curricula dealing with equality and human relations.

- Before desegregation, work with teacher training institutions to provide special training for those who want to teach in a desegregated environment. Practice teaching should be in integrated schools, rather than an "antiseptic" laboratory class.

- Involve the leadership of the teachers' union in plans for staff desegregation and inservice training.

### Ways To Develop Positive Student Attitudes

- School district policies must assure that students will be given a major role in helping to carry out desegregation. This involvement must be both in the development of plans and in their implementation.

- Form integrated teams of students to work on problems in desegregating schools. The teams might visit other schools in successfully desegregated school systems to get ideas. They also should be used to help orient students in feeder schools.

- Provide human relations training programs for students with constant follow-up and evaluation to prevent problems from festering.

- School district policies must assure that discipline procedures are fair and equitable to all students and that students are free from intimidation and fear.

- School districts must develop multiracial, multiethnic curricula relating to the achievements of all minority groups to help improve students' attitudes about each other.
- Extracurricular student activities should be carried out with no loss of leadership status. Students should be encouraged to establish structures to assure equal representation on teams, as cheerleaders, publications staff and other leadership roles. For example, student council presidents from schools that are being integrated could serve as co-presidents.
- Activity buses to allow students to remain after school must be provided by the school district.

**Ways To Handle Discipline Problems**

- School districts must have a written, due process student discipline code and must make sure that school building codes conform to it. The code must be administered firmly, but fairly. Steps must be taken to make sure students, staff and parents understand the code. This may mean small group meetings as well as distributing printed material.
- School districts should have a well-coordinated crisis plan involving law enforcement agencies to be used in case of student or community unrest. The plan should spell out how to legally deal with the problem of "outsiders" on school premises.
- Alternative programs should be developed for disruptive students, emphasizing counseling and behavioral training rather than punishment. Programs in the alternatives should keep students in pace with regular classroom work.
- If a crisis occurs, school districts should have open channels of communication with their students.

**Ways To Develop Educational Programs for All Students**

- Establish districtwide minimum expectations for all students and design programs, remedial and otherwise, to help each student meet the minimum standards.
- Allow students to move from one school to another to meet their individual needs, as long as this does not upset the racial balances.

Alternative programs should result from community demand and planning.

- Be deliberate in planning the curriculum. It should contain goals and means for attaining human relations understanding and an appreciation of society's pluralism. Use programs in the arts and humanities to foster positive integration.
- Work for efforts at the federal level to allow the use of Title I funds to follow desegregated students to their new schools.

### Ways To Develop Understanding and/or Acceptance of Busing

- Avoid buzz words such as "forced busing." Call it "pupil reassignment" or "transportation policies."
- Make the busing plan two-way, treating all segments of the student population equitably.
- Emphasize the program advantages of reassigning students—quality education at the end of the ride.
- Make sure that the specifics of the busing program are well known. Arrange for parents and children to ride the buses together on the assigned route before desegregation begins. Hold open houses at the new schools at the end of the bus ride.
- Emphasize safety precautions—and let the community know that this is a strong policy. Train bus drivers to handle discipline problems, but also establish training and behavior codes for students. Let parents know what the standards are. Use bus stop monitors, if necessary, for safety and to help students develop self-discipline for the bus ride.
- Hold open hearings on bus routes so that parents can have some involvement in the busing plan.
- Set reasonable time limits on the length of bus rides and try to keep drivers on the same routes.

### Ways To Develop Positive Media Relationships

- Media relations must be a year-round effort, coordinated at the district level by a professional communication specialist, preferably on the school district staff. School districts—the administrative staff and the school board—must be open and honest with the media at all times. Good media support during a crisis depends on credibility and respect earned over a long period of time.

- As much as possible, media relations should be on a person-to-person basis, rather than through just news releases and memos. During crucial periods of desegregation, have a spokesperson who is adept at being interviewed, but who also has the authority to represent the school system. There must be unanimity by the school board and administrative staff in public comments on desegregation.

- Respect the professionalism of the media, and ask for the same. Don't shade the truth—but don't be reluctant to constructively criticize media coverage if it is erroneous or inflammatory.

- Involve the media in desegregation plans. Meet regularly with editors and management and give them roles in developing the plan. Ask their cooperation in developing informational public service programming that will put desegregation in a proper perspective.

- Plan a media campaign that will balance the attention given to desegregation. Prepare information for the media on numerous other educational programs in the school system—to convey the theme that education of all children is still the purpose of the schools.

- Explore the use of all types of media coverage—e.g., community newspapers, cable TV systems. Representative student contributions to local newspapers and TV programs can give a community an expanded perspective of what is happening inside schools. Communications should be multilingual, where necessary.

- Develop and distribute media guidelines to all schools and staff. These should cover crisis plans—how the central office communication staff will be involved with individual schools if problems develop.

## Chapter 10.

# At the Building Level

There is little question that good school public relations begin at the top, with a strong commitment from the superintendent and a comprehensive policy from the board of education.

But there is little question that the most **effective** component of a school district's public relations program is at the school-building level.

It is there that the parents are either turned on or turned off; that the community is either welcomed or ignored; and where the child is either motivated to learn or allowed to wither on the educational vine.

In the long run, the "good news" about education is best told to the parents and taxpayers by the students themselves. Happy, enthusiastic, challenged, learning children are the best possible public relations program any school system can have.

And perhaps next best is a school that goes out of its way to communicate with its community; that builds communication with the public into its daily routine; that makes a concerted effort to reach out and encourage two-way understanding with its publics.

The process involves both bringing parents and key community communicators into the school and reaching out to those who can't make it in. The following are some field-tested ideas on both:

### Bringing Them In

- Have an open-door visitation policy. Invite parents and community members to school and repeat the invitation often—in newsletters, in the parents' handbook, in report card stuffers, by special individual invitation.

- Have a visitors' day for prospective students and their parents—not just for the entering class but for those at any level who may be considering attendance at your school. Publicize it well throughout the community.

- Hold a principal's coffee at the school on a regular basis to draw parents and other visitors to the school for informal discussions.

- Publish a schedule for telephone conferences with teachers, specialists and administrators. Set a variety of times for the parents' convenience.

- Encourage visits and participation by nonparents.

- Hold tours for businesspersons; have a grandparents day; invite in people who live near the school.

## Reaching Out

- Encourage good news calls from teachers. Although these require willing participation on the part of your staff to be successful, you can provide basic guidelines for calls and insure that privacy and a telephone are available at convenient times during the school day so that teachers will be more likely to act on the suggestion.

- Encourage elementary teachers to summarize the events and classroom progress of the day with their students and urge them to "tell your parents what you learned at school today."

- Identify people in key locations and make a special effort to get information to them. Invite them to the school and ask for their help in communicating with and providing feedback from the community. These locations might include beauty and barber shops, laundromats, neighborhood stores, storefront and traditional churches, day care centers, and the like.

- Just as you may have block parents for safety, have neighborhood volunteers to provide a channel for two-way communication: someone in each neighborhood to convey community concerns, explain new programs, to get the word out and back to the school.

- Hold small, informal neighborhood meetings in the homes of volunteers led by parents or students your staff has trained to explain special programs, discuss curriculum changes and answer other questions. These are particularly helpful for parents of the entering class or newcomers to the area.

- Organize a speakers bureau of students and teachers for parent and community group meetings.
- Take classes into the community: band rehearsals or art classes at shopping centers, for example, give the public a first-hand look at how a program works.

## KEY COMMUNICATORS

Perhaps the most important concept of good school public relations at the building level is that of the key communicator—the man at the gas pumps, the hair dresser, the bartender, the minister, the small businessman, the realtor, the garden club president, the doctor, the dentist, and many more.

Many of these people meet and communicate with more members of the community in a week than school personnel do in several months. And they can have a dramatic impact on spreading the good or bad word about a school.

They can be effective not only in times of crisis and rumor, but in calmer times, too, when good news is unobstructed by emotional charge and countercharge.

Principals should establish a key communicator corps and meet with them regularly, explaining their role, keeping them fully informed about what is happening in the school, and answering their questions.

Key communicators should be encouraged to visit the school at any time, and the principal should be on call to meet with them from time to time on their own turf, outside the school.

### Pacesetters

The Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Mo., uses block captains as key communicators, with 1,500 block captains and some 60 persons who act as block captain organizers in different neighborhoods. The key communicators are called Parkway Pacesetters.

An elementary school pacesetter is assigned to a block of about 15 homes and is responsible for the delivery of school materials to the homes, as well as a brief contact with the parents in each home at the beginning of the school year.

Secondary school pacesetters cover shopping centers and make contacts with merchants who pass out school informational materials.

The pacesetters are well organized, alert to the changing needs of the community and able to channel both school information to the community and community information to the school.

It wasn't easy. It took four years for the group to overcome such problems as the size of the district, the mobility of the population, the number of housing subdivisions and such.

But properly administered, such a program can work and work well, no matter what the size of a school or a district.

### Ombudsmen

The Bedford Junior High School in Westport, Conn., uses parent ombudsmen as channels through which questions can be directed to the school.

The school selects three sets of parents from each of its three attendance areas who meet at least monthly with the principal and staff and have quick access at all times to school personnel to get answers to questions that other parents are asking.

But, whether they are called key communicators, block captains or ombudsmen, their mission is the same: to improve two-way communication between the community and the school, thereby increasing the community's confidence in the school.

## CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Another proven means to effect better school communication with the community is the citizens advisory committee.

Says Jerry Varner, coordinator of public information for the Beaverton, Ore., School District:

> The one overriding plus of local school committees relates to their value in improving communication between citizens and their schools. They make schools more accessible to citizens and, when functioning properly, they make the public more accessible to the schools.
>
> They provide the district with a broad base of knowledgeable lay leaders who almost always support school programs. A word of caution: support cannot be taken for granted. It comes as a result of

developing and conducting sound school programs **plus** involving local school committee members and keeping them informed.

For a school board and superintendent who accept and practice the principle that the schools belong to the public and, consequently, that a better school program results from citizen participation and open communication, there are no minuses. Hard work, yes, but the rewards are worth it.

In Beaverton, the following procedures are followed with school advisory committees:

- Minutes of local committee meetings are reviewed each month by the school board.
- The administration and/or board reviews each recommendation and responds in writing to the appropriate committee.
- Principals meet with local committees and give members visibility by introducing them at school functions, covering their activities in newsletters, briefing them on curriculum developments, and working with them as needed to assure fulfillment of their functions.
- The superintendent furnishes committee members advance copies of board agendas, board minutes, newsletters, and other documents and publications to help give committee members a broad understanding of the total district operation.
- Some members of local school committees are invited to serve on each district-level citizens advisory committee.
- Board members meet from time to time with local committees in the zones they represent.
- The board gives audience to any local committee as requested.
- The administration and board conduct an informational workshop for newly elected committee members annually.
- The superintendent holds briefing sessions for local school committees on special topics from time to time.
- Local school committee members are asked to express their views on district operations through a variety of channels.

## How To Set Up a CAC

Philip Dahlinger, superintendent of the Rutland (Vt.) Southwest Supervisory Union, suggests the following steps for establishing a system of building-level citizens advisory committees (CAC):

**Procedures:**

- A proposal for building-level citizens advisory committees is drafted and presented to the board of education for approval as a pilot program.
- Building principal recommends committee members for the board's approval (most have 15 members).
- At least one member of the committee should represent the PTA.
- Members should be representative of the geographic attendance areas served by the school.
- Within two months of its appointment, each committee submits bylaws for approval by the board.
- The committee is set to meet at least four times a year with representatives of the principal and faculty attending each session.
- Minutes are taken at each meeting with copies sent to appropriate people.

**Resources:**

- The school provides a place to meet and refreshments for each meeting.
- Most clerical and duplicating work needed by the committee can be handled by the school secretary.

**Scheduling:**

- About a month should be allowed for appointment of committee members.
- The committee should be allowed about two months to draft its bylaws.

- Committee meetings should be held at least quarterly during the school year.

**Evaluation:** Anonymous questionnaires and an evaluation subcommittee of the citizens advisory committee can be used to evaluate the program.

## Operating Guidelines

Charles A. Scott, superintendent of the Upper Merion (Pa.) Area School District, adds the following "operating" guidelines for a building-level advisory committee:

- Give the committee a specific task, objectives, guidelines and a date to begin and end.
- Provide orientation.
- Appoint a liaison between the committee and the board.
- Make sure the committee keeps detailed records and notes.
- Keep committee members informed and provide a means for them to communicate with all citizens.
- All committee meetings should be open to the public.

# COMMUNICATING WITH STAFF, STUDENTS AND PARENTS

In meeting the critical need for external communication at the building level, too many principals either overlook the need for internal communication or take it for granted. This can be a fatal mistake.

If staff, students and parents don't promote the school, all the key communicators and community advisory boards in the world won't overcome a poor school image generated from within the school family.

## The Staff

Following are suggestions for a principal interested in generating better communication with his or her staff:

### Use Various Methods of Communication:

- **Meetings** should have a specific purpose, a structured agenda, and a topic of interest to all who are expected to attend. When possible, meet with small groups and summarize information for others in brief reports. Don't dominate. Two-way communication works for the staff, too.

- **Post staff announcements** on a well-located bulletin board, and in the faculty lounge, as well as putting them in the mailboxes. Also post copies of materials sent home to parents.

- **Staff newsletters** can reflect a variety of interests and concerns. Mention hobbies, nonprofessional achievements, community activities, as well as strictly school-related items.

- **Check stuffers** have the impact of a written message without the formality. Write little notes with positive personal messages that say you see your staff as people: "Congratulations on your new grandson. I'd like to see a picture when you get one." "I especially enjoyed the concert in which you played." Such thoughts may cross your mind, but usually you may not have a chance to express them. Why not put them in writing and deliver them with the check?

### Increase Your Approachability:

- **Encourage input at a specific time during the day** when many of your staff are free. Whenever it is, they should know they can count on finding you available and receptive to their ideas.

- **Vary your lunch time** to socialize with a larger number of your staff in the casual cafeteria atmosphere.

### Encourage Professional Growth:

- Commend your staff when they have done a good job. And remember to say "thank you," preferably in writing.

- Be receptive to new ideas and be willing to facilitate constructive change. Repeated roadblocks or lukewarm receptions to new ideas discourage even the most creative and dedicated seekers of a better way. Worse yet, they breed discontent in the very people who could contribute most to your school. Instead of asking "why", try to ask "why not?"

## Reaching the Students

Principals with good internal communication programs agree just about unanimously that students are communicators, too.

Different principals do it in different ways, but most find time to involve their students in the process of communication.

Principal Mike Walls of the University Hills Elementary School, Rochester, Mich., calls it CHAT (Children Having A Turn). He sets aside an hour a week to listen to student questions, concerns and suggestions. The first 10 students who sign up on a CHAT sheet posted outside his office get to attend that week's CHAT session.

Says Walls: "It's a great technique for reminding yourself that schools are for kids, and that the most important PR agents any school has are its students."

And, he adds, informed students mean informed parents.

One California elementary principal calls her student conferences "Lunch Bunches." Twice weekly, she sits down to lunch with four or five students in her small conference room and in a friendly, informal and personal way, she finds out what is on their minds.

There are several pluses: the students learn that the principal is human; the lunch invitations make the students feel important; the principal gets to know the students on a first-name basis, and the parents are enthusiastic.

In other school districts, principals form student advisory committees, others make it a point to visit each class every week to chat briefly with students, and others are in the halls at break times to talk informally with students between classes.

At Troy High School, Fullerton, Calif., students carry the good word as speakers to community groups.

One vehicle for the student PR program is the Troy Pipeline Committee, made up of 12 students, six community advisors, an assistant principal and a school district communication aide.

Students are coached by a speech teacher and receive course credit for taking part in "Student Speech Teams," which speak to parents of incoming freshmen, student groups, teachers and administrators at other schools, civil and community groups and PTAs.

The student speakers also hold weekly programs for incoming freshmen at which they provide school orientation information, and they also go out into the community in a "good neighbor policy" that involves ringing doorbells to dispense school information, answering questions and leaving information sheets.

Assistant Principal John Daywalt says the Pipeline was student-inspired and is student-managed, and it involves a lot of work, with members meeting at least once a week to plan activities and schedule additional work sessions.

The Pipeline, he said, increases community support for the school, increases the number of school volunteers, gets students involved in many community activities and "creates good feeling between young people and the over-30 set."

To a certain degree, however, staff and students are easy audiences for a resourceful, communicative principal. They are on hand every day, and they can be formed, with proper insight, direction and human relations on the part of the principal, into a cohesive communication team.

## The Parents

But parents, many times, are a different story.

They are busy people in their own right, particularly in an era when, more often than not, both parents work, and getting them involved in school activities and school communication takes some doing.

Herman Steger, principal of the Maple Grove Elementary School, Boise, Idaho, contends that "an activist parent-teacher group is inherent in every successful home-school relationship." He offers the following suggestions for revitalizing the PTA or other parent organizations:

1. Hold open and competitive elections for organization officers. At least two candidates for each office. Limit the terms to two in succession.

2. At the September meeting, divide attendees into small groups of 8 to 10. Each group, to define areas of concern and/or activities for total group to work on. Each group then reports. Use those concerns listed most often as projects for year.

3. Involve community in all school activities . . . i.e., room volunteers, ticket sales, faculty activities, ad hoc committees, etc.

4. Hold an annual school improvement project, playground, building, equipment, etc. Make this a do-it-yourself project. Plant trees, build a 40-ft. dirt hill with tunnels, etc., build shelves, construct playground equipment.

5. Provide recreational outlets: volleyball, one night a week; basketball, one night a week.

6. Participate as a unit in citywide projects, such as Christmas float, parades.

7. Include local unit leaders and outstanding individuals as recipients at annual school awards assembly.

8. Recognize "Parent of the Week" (or "Month") in school publication.

9. Be available.

10. Publish monthly school paper with calendar, report from the president, committee reports, etc.

But there are many areas for involvement of parents other than the PTA.

At the Briarglen Elementary School, Union Public Schools, Tulsa, Okla., parents organized "block parents" to watch out for the safety and well being of all students, with two homes in each block serving as "safety stops" for children with problems ranging from skinned knees to fear of strangers.

Each block parent's home is identified by an emblem in the window, and block parents keep logs with student contacts, the problem and the date.

And in some cases, the block parent is not necessarily a "parent" at all, but, rather, a concerned senior citizen.

Says one parent volunteer: "It got parents involved and working for a common cause, the safety of their children."

At the Washoe County School District, Reno, Nev., teachers developed a program for parents focusing on personalized public relations. The project involved a six-week block of mini-courses, one afternoon a week, with parents involved in the planning, teaching and evaluation of the courses.

According to Rose Bullis, director of information, parents and teachers, working together, developed a timeline, divided up responsibilities and wrote letters to parents explaining the project and inviting them to a planning breakfast.

As a result, more than 100 ideas for mini-courses were developed. Each parent picked three top choices and the 22 most popular choices were scheduled. Each parent also chose one mini-course to help prepare with a teacher, and they served as teachers, aides, publicizers and evaluators of the courses.

According to Bullis, the results were all positive:

- Teachers' interaction within the building increased.
- Communication between parents and school staff increased.
- Parents and teachers worked together in a relaxed atmosphere.
- The project involved all age groups.
- Excitement permeated the school during the project.

## Seeing the Other Side

At the North Glade Elementary School, Miami, Fla., 46 parents took over faculty and staff jobs for half a day.

Parents volunteered to become teachers, cafeteria workers, custodians and secretaries. And not just mothers were involved. Fathers volunteered, too, as did bilingual parents.

They got first-hand knowledge of just what was involved in running a school of 900 pupils, and stories about the parent "takeover" were carried on wire services from coast to coast.

At the other end of the spectrum, parents at the Finneytown High School, Hamilton County Public Schools, Cincinnati, Ohio, take the place of their sons and daughters once a year on Student/Parent Exchange Day.

At the end of the day, after going through an entire roster of classes, the parents fill out a questionnaire about what they like and what they do not like about the instructional program.

Not only have the answers been highly supportive of the quality of instruction and the variety of courses offered, but parental concerns about the condition of facilities led to a successful bond campaign to improve the facilities.

Still another twist to the theme of parent involvement is applied at the Whitney Learning Center, Cerritos, Calif., with the "Shadow Your Parent" program, where students spend a full day following a parent through his or her daily routine.

According to Tony Valla, the center's career director, not only does the project bring students and parents closer together, but "after going through rush hour traffic and witnessing the rewards and frustrations of their parents' jobs, students could better understand their parents' tired feelings at the end of the day."

And the Norris Elementary School, Omaha, Neb., does it both ways during "Switch Day": Parents spend the morning with their children, following a typical student schedule, and after lunch children accompany their parents to work for the afternoon.

The theme of it all: closer parental involvement in and understanding of the educational process.

## Into the Community

But even beyond students, parents and staff, many resourceful principals see the entire community as public relations turf.

Principal Ralph T. Conlon Jr. of Bulkeley High School, Hartford, Conn., took his faculty out to supermarkets and parks to make presentations to the community about the new high school.

The teachers used portable easels and charts, and a bilingual teacher talked to the community's Spanish-speaking population.

Locations of the presentations were carried in the local media, and the affairs were well attended, with a lot of two-way communication between the presenters and the community.

The large response was in sharp contrast to the very few people who attended the formal presentation held within the feeder schools, and the staff found something quite interesting: parents were far more interested in the curriculum of the new school than in its facilities.

Conlon said the overwhelming response from the community was that they were "glad to see some faculty out in the community for a change."

At the Doyle Elementary School, Doylestown, Pa., the first faculty meeting of the year is a tour of the community on a school bus the day before the start of school, with teachers getting a local history and geography lesson, from landmarks and historical sites to overcrowded housing without inside plumbing.

The results are twofold: Teachers gain a better understanding of their students through their environment, and students, parents and community members realize that the teachers care enough to visit the community.

At the Longstreth Elementary School in Philadelphia, fifth and sixth graders tour community facilities such as research laboratories, a science museum, a planetarium and a pollution control center, as well as several city agencies, interviewing adults to find out more about their jobs.

Said one teacher: "These students learned things and did things their test scores said they weren't capable of doing."

And in Duchess County, N.Y., high school seniors take a one-semester course in local government which requires attendance at sessions of the county legislature, at committee meetings and public hearings, and at various other county government activities.

In short, the community is out there, ready, willing and able to be both a learning and a public relations tool. Wise principals put this tool to work to build better relations for themselves, their schools, faculties and students.

## What Does the Principal Do?

But how about the principalship itself? How does the wise principal explain his or her role to the community?

Marvin M. Harris, principal of Eastern Hills High School, Fort Worth, Tex., puts it this way:

"The principalship in today's school is an awesome job—instructional leader, business official, guidance counselor, building manager. The principal is the hub of the school—every facet of school life begins, comes through, or ends in his or her office. That desk is where the buck stops.

"The principal can make the job easier by good communication with the school community—parents, students and faculty and by explaining the principal's role."

Harris has some hints on explaining the principal's role to parents, the community and students:

### Explaining the role to parents

1. Be involved in the programs of parent groups.

2. Use every opportunity to speak to parent groups explaining the school program and the principal's role in it.

3. Make publications concerning the school program available to parent groups.

4. Offer the services of the principal's office in helping to arrange the year's programs for PTA, etc.

5. Invite parents of all new students to an informal afternoon get acquainted tea or coffee.

6. Hold an evening open house early in the school year for all parents.
7. Use individual parent conferences to give information concerning the principalship.
8. Involve as many parents as possible on advisory committees, program panels, and as chaperons for school activities.

**Explaining the role to the community:**

1. Become active in community service organizations.
2. Take advantage of opportunities at service organization meetings to visit and explain the role of the school and its principal.
3. Be available as a speaker or panelist for service clubs or other groups.
4. Encourage staff members also to be active in community affairs.
5. Encourage night activities or programs involving not only parents, but the entire community. Use such opportunities to briefly explain the school program and the principal's part in it.
6. Develop publications on school programs for distribution throughout the community.

**Explaining the role to students:**

1. Develop a brochure on the programs available and the principal's role in these programs.
2. Arrange an orientation program for all incoming students in which the role of the school principal is stressed.
3. Advocate a strong, vigorous student council in which the principal is active, but not dominant.
4. Invite students to the principal's office for informal rap sessions.
5. Offer to write a weekly column on the principalship for the student newspaper.
6. Take time to visit with students in the halls, lunch room, and play areas.

## Are You Listening?

One of the most important tools of the principal, according to Rich Bagin, administrative assistant for school-community relations in the Bensalem Township School District, Cornwells Heights, Pa., is **feedback.** But feedback, Bagin says, "is only as good as you, the principal, want to make it."

Bagin suggests devices for two areas of feedback:

**Internal Feedback:**

- Principal's advisory committee
- Family meetings
- Exit interviews for employes
- "What I like best or least about the school"
- Principal's student committee
- Teacher evaluation conference
- Lunch or breakfast with the "boss"
- Surveys

**External Feedback:**

- PTA Groups—beef them up; make them more than "cookies and tea" groups
- Parent advisory councils
- Key communicator groups
- Parents' exit interviews
- Back-to-School nights; PTA meetings; evaluations
- "We're Doing A Good Job—Right/Wrong?" cards
- Building goals conferences

- Lunch or breakfast with principals
- Koffee klatches in homes
- Surveys
- Volunteer interviews
- Taped messages or questions
- Suggestion Box in building newsletters

## Setting Up a Program

James D. Carlile, principal of the Cedar Park Junior High School, Beaverton, Ore., sums up the principal's role in school PR this way:

> The American public school must depend for its strength and vigor on the support of local citizens, and in turn, the interest and support of citizens depends on their understanding of school affairs. The building principal is the key. He or she is the communication leader—utilizing available talent, resources and facilities. But good intentions mean nothing. The principal must have a **plan** to meet special communication needs and problems of his or her own school community.

Carlile has some step-by-step advice for principals in setting up their own PR program:

1. Determine with whom you need to communicate. Don't forget the need to communicate effectively with central administration. Often they can help considerably in getting your message to a wider audience.

2. Plan your program on a yearly basis.

3. Prepare a varied program. Publications from the National School Public Relations Association can be very helpful in suggesting new and valuable techniques of communicating with one's public.

    - Inservice for the secretarial staff in telephone manners, greeting student and adult visitors, office organization. Make certain you meet new students and their parents.

- Organize your parents night, open house, back-to-school night programs so that they meet parent needs. Provide for parent evaluations at these programs.

- School newsletters are popular with parents. Provide balance between articles about programs and those about students. If time and resources are limited, enlist PTA members or community volunteers to produce a newsletter for you.

- Find ways to develop two-way communication. **Don't** be satisfied with just telling parents about school—learn to listen also.

- Host Parent Visitation Days where parents sign up to come to school when students are there. Limit guests to manageable number (15-20). Prearrange classroom visitations for them. Be certain to notify teachers in advance. Then sit down with the guests and discuss what they saw and heard.

- Initiate coffees in the homes of parents. Don't wait for parents to call and ask.

- Call 5-10 parents a month whom you do not know to discuss their concerns about their children or school in general.

- Include post cards in report cards or newsletters surveying parents about current issues at school.

- Provide as many opportunities as possible for parents to volunteer in school.

## Teachers—A Vital Link

Teachers need PR training, too.

That's the concensus of most school public relations professionals who recognize that, next to the students themselves, the teacher is the most influential PR person for parents at the building level.

Ruth E. Messing, information specialist for the Poway (Calif.) Unified School District, suggests inservice training workshops in public relations for teachers. Her advice includes starting with a dynamic leader with a background in both teaching and public relations. Conduct the program in an intensive one-day workshop, she says, or in a series of

1-2 hour sessions. And, offer it for credit if possible. The following are some areas which could be covered.

- **Writing letters home and communicating with the public.** Have participants bring samples of letters they have written to parents. Explain the necessity for avoiding educationese. Critique some of the letters, then break into small groups and rewrite the letters. Bring a model from each small group back to the large group for reaction.

- **Parent-teacher conferences.** Use NSPRA booklet and filmstrip, *Conference Time For Teachers and Parents*. Augment it with skits demonstrating good and bad conferences. Discuss ways to dispell teacher and parent anxieties.

- **Open House.** Use the small group method to generate ideas and uncover problems. Examples: First impressions are lasting impressions. Slacks, dirty sweaters, and unkept hair create images which can become generalized about all teachers. Don't overwhelm adults with sophisticated equipment and materials. Give them a subtle appreciation of how a tape recorder can aid a child in improving appreciation of his or her speech.

- **Dealing with the media.** Have a reporter attend this session. Explain that the fate of schools and the welfare of students and teachers depends upon the goodwill of the tax paying public. Nobody will accuse a teacher of bragging. Instead, a good story will strengthen the school's and pupils' reputation. Give handouts on how to work with reporters, how to write releases, etc. Give examples of news ideas that can be found in any school.

- **Public relations in the classroom.** Stress the importance of what "Johnny" says across the dinner table.

- **Public relations in the community.** The basic concept still exists that a teacher must be someone BETTER than average. Teachers who complain bitterly about the procedures or administration in their schools, or characteristics of other teachers, are their own worst public relations problem.

Wrap up the inservice program with evaluations. A brief questionnaire should be used. Guarantee anonymity. Seek specific answers. Have respondents rate speakers and sessions. In addition to multiple choice questions, include open-end questions that can improve future workshops.

## More Teacher Tips

And here are some other good public relations techniques that your teachers can use, taken from the pages of *IT STARTS in the Classroom*, a communication newsletter for classroom teachers and administrators, published by the National School Public Relations Assn.

- Teachers should be alert to innovative projects, student achievements and interesting crafts that would be newsworthy to local papers and TV.
- Home visits—an essential to reach working parents/minority parents if they are unable to come to school functions. Shows good communication attempts by the school to reach out and understand importance of teacher-student-parent-home relationships.
- Happygrams or Smileygrams—to parents whenever Johnny/Mary does an exceptionally good job within the classroom. Telephone calls to parents are also slated to alert parents on how well Johnny can read or volunteer to help another classmate at spelling.
- Children love to be called by their nicknames. Teachers should find out immediately during the first week of school what their students prefer to be called.
- Many teachers have special skills and expertise that can be shared with their students. One teacher with a polaroid pasted up pictures of her class for Open House functions. Communicate with a camera! Everybody loves to see themselves—and their friends.

## PUBLICATIONS

One important area of school public relations too often overlooked by school building staffs is the area of publications.

Says Kenneth L. Weir, coordinator of school-community relations for the North Penn School District, Lansdale, Pa.: "Every basic school communication program should include a carefully planned effort using words and pictures to tell the school story. The ideal situation includes full-time, well-trained publications specialists. Too many school principals must find their own personnel, because the district—due to size, budget, and/or attitudes—will not hire information/public relations/publications staff."

Weir has some questions and ready answers about building-level publications:

**What can the principal do about publications?**

1. The school principal must understand the importance of publications The principal must demonstrate that school publications are important.

2. Invite a small student/faculty/parent committee to join in a review of the "products" of the past year.

3. Invite a community advisory committee to meet monthly, quarterly, or as needed for review of school publications problems. Include newspaper reporter, PR-type employes from local industry, and parents with related education or experience.

4. Rank publications according to priority. Improve only one at a time—one each year if that is all that is feasible. (Don't try to do it all at once.)

5. Advocate that appropriate teachers be given extra-duty contracts to write about, edit, or photograph the school story. Make a visible commitment to improve publications.

6. Identify student writers and photographers who can be given release time to work on school publications. Schedule students instead of club period, activities period, or half-day for senior career study program.

7. Arrange with parent volunteers for writing, editing and photography.

8. Use student newspaper and yearbook staff as much as possible.

9. Arrange with local newspaper photographer to buy extra prints for use in school publications.

10. Develop comprehensive photo file in main office.

11. Build idea file of good publications from other schools.

**Which publications need your attention most?**

1. **Memos and letters** should be attractive and concise. (Too often school memos and letters sound as though they were dictated by a frantic principal.)

2. **Parent newsletter.** Is it mailed to parents? If not, most don't arrive at the home.

3. **Student newspaper/yearbook.** Is the principal quoted? Is the principal's opinion sought? What is the relationship between principal and the student newspaper staff?

4. **Town newspaper.** Is the relationship between principal and newspaper staff lukewarm or cordial and cooperative?

5. **Curriculum guide/program of studies.** Descriptions of academic program must be viewed as the single most important publication. Explaining your program is top priority.

6. **Student handbook.** The orientation materials given students are second in importance to the curriculum materials.

7. **Award programs and commencement**—related publications. Describes the "finished product." Carefully examined by parents.

8. **Annual report.** For students, staff, parents, superiors, board, and total community.

9. **Special topic publications.** Each has its own audience. Each must be considered important. Certain readers will judge principal on basis of single publication.

10. **Report card.** Appearance is very important. Is there anything "warm" or humane about the format? Whether mailed or carried by students—the report card is usually a cold computer printout "untouched by humans."

11. **News releases.** How many last week, last month, last year? The school should be the single best source of news by the local newspaper. Did the principal send well-written releases on an attractive preprinted form?

## Developing a Policy Handbook

In putting together a handbook of school policies, procedures and information for students and parents, the following information is generally what parents and students want to know:

**School Policies**

- Attendance
- Grading and report cards
- Conferences
- Discipline
- Emergency school closings
- Homework
- Trips
- Eligibility for participation in athletics
- Access to student records

**School Calendar**

- Holidays
- Inservice days: schools open but not for students
- PTA meetings
- Annual events: concerts, science fairs, commencement, etc.
- Athletic seasons
- Report card days and end of grading periods
- Dates for open house, conferences, etc.

**Staff Information**

- Key contact people: administrators, counselors, department chairpersons
- Specialists

**General Information**

- School hours
- School meals
- Fees
- Extracurricular programs
- Volunteer programs
- Parent-teacher organizations
- Student insurance
- Emergency care procedures
- Transportation for handicapped children

**Program Information**

- Meaning of "competency-based curriculum"; what changes it will make in your school program
- Team teaching, multi-age grouping, and other variations from traditional structures, where applicable
- Required and elective programs

Besides general program descriptions, every elementary teacher or secondary school department should be encouraged to send information home to parents about such things as:

- ✓ What students are taught in a given grade or class.
- ✓ Criteria used for grading.

✓ Textbooks and supplementary reading.

✓ Field trips—cost, transportation.

✓ Volunteer help or resources needed.

✓ Other standards, activities, or policies pertinent to that class.

## RELEASING TEST SCORES

To many school principals, communicating when things are going well is not much of a problem. It's always reasonably easy and enjoyable to spread good news.

But when problems arise, more often than not it's a different story. Few principals are equipped by training to handle crisis communication.

And the public disclosure of basic skills achievement or assessment test scores is most definitely a crisis to most building principals. Yet, with proper planning and procedures, it need not be.

*Releasing Test Scores,* an NSPRA publication, offers this advice:

> As the first line of public information and relations at the individual school level, the principal has to be ready—and willing—to take an active role. Individual schools with unusually high—or low—scores may find themselves bombarded by reporters, but the majority of the buildings will be generally uncovered except for a cryptic column of numbers in a statistical summary. The parents of the children who attend those schools, however, are no less concerned, so it's up to each principal to answer their questions in a satisfactory way.
>
> A school-based information program is a must. It should be aimed at parents—those who read the district-wide results in the papers and wonder how their schools fared, and those who don't read the papers at all. The latter group is larger than is generally acknowledged, and it is the most susceptible to back-fence gossip. In either case, the information is received most favorably when it comes voluntarily from the school, not in response to an angry protest.
>
> The wise superintendent will not send principals out into the wilderness without some sort of survival training. And the wise principal insists on knowing the facts ahead of time. The topic should be high on the agenda of a principals' meeting at least

several weeks before the release date, and the superintendent and testing director should spend as much time as necessary explaining what all the scores mean, and how and to which audiences the **district** will explain them.

The book recommends that the school district's testing coordinator provide all principals with a "Test Score Survival Kit," composed of the following:

1. A sample of the district's proposed news release.
2. A clear, concise explanation of the entire assessment program, including why it was started, what it shows, and what will be done with the results. It would probably be helpful if it were prepared in question-and-answer form, including those questions the general public will be most likely to ask. The answers should be written so the public can understand them, avoiding technical language and "educationese."
3. For those who will communicate their results in writing, such as in a community newsletter, a sample narrative to illustrate the writing style and vocabulary that will make the program comprehensible to the reader.

Principals should have time to plan and polish their information program, to meet with staff members to explain the test results, and to outline everyone's role in the program. And principals ought to give serious thought to turning the release of test scores into a full-fledged public relations/information campaign.

An assessment program is, in fact, an ideal vehicle for establishing an accountability dialogue with the community. Educators may argue that a single listing of test results doesn't really tell much about an educational program, but they will have a difficult time convincing the community. So why not take advantage of the requirement to issue a report by incorporating it into a broader information package that tells where you've been, where you are, and where you hope to go?

Ideally, this should evolve into an annual effort, because any report on school objectives should center on the year's progress toward attaining them. It sounds like a big project, and it is. But since it will require the involvement of the entire faculty in setting the objectives for the school, it will pay off instructionally as well as in good public relations.

# THE ANNUAL REPORT

The Montgomery County (Md.) Board of Education felt so strongly about the need to report assessment scores on a school-by-school basis that in 1974 it mandated that each of the district's 202 schools issue an annual school progress report each October.

And the board issues detailed guidelines as to what the report should involve. These guidelines can provide a strong basis for giving the community a yearly look at the accomplishments, structure and goals of their school:

1. **Community**—a description of the characteristics of the attendance area of the school, and a statement of the major community concerns as expressed by the PTA, advisory groups, letters and phone calls and surveys.

2. **Enrollment**—pertinent statistics showing trends and characteristics of the student body. Here is where the results of the standardized tests are reported, including an emphasis on those areas where the school scored a certain amount above, or below, the norm. This section can also include information on tests administered by the school, performance on college admission tests, results of any follow-up study that may have been done on graduates, and so forth.

3. **Staff**—the number of full-time staff, both professional and supporting, their years of experience and level of training, and their assignments in the type of organizational plan used by the school.

4. **Building**—a description of the school plant itself—the capacity, number of rooms, special facilities, etc., with a description of how the building design affects the organization or program. Immediate plans for renovations or additions should be reviewed.

5. **Objectives**—for the past year, a list of the objectives and a discussion of how well the school did in attaining them; for the current year, a description of each objective, the strategy for attaining it, and the evidence that will indicate success. The guidelines caution principals that the setting of objectives requires the involvement of staff and community, and that each school objective should be related to the information in the previous sections of the report.

Annual reports at the building level are a trend for the future. Already three states, Ohio, Florida and California, mandate them by state law. The alert principal, aware that in good part his or her success depends on the support and understanding of the school's programs by both parents and the community, welcomes this direction as a unique and valuable way to communicate. These reports when developed with the aid of parents and students can provide a balanced and realistic picture of progress within the building. And those parents and students involved in developing the report become valuable spokespersons in the community.

## DISCIPLINE

Another communication problem that can be attacked effectively by the building principal and turned into a PR plus is discipline. The following ideas are reprinted from *IT STARTS in the Classroom:*

Parents are given "positive strokes" for participating in the John Muir School at Hayward, Calif.—a school where a child has not been suspended for four years and where all types of discipline problems have been decreasing. Principal Eva Long feels that if both parents and students find a warm, accepting atmosphere in the school, they will work together on behavior problems. Parents have a center in the school where they can "drop in" to visit and share concerns about their children. Parent volunteers work out of a headquarters in the center, which also houses a parent library. Parents are recognized for their participation on a parents' "Honor Board," similar to one for students. Counseling parents is part of the discipline procedure, and if the principal does the counseling, teachers always receive a follow-up. "There is a lot for kids to turn to here—the principal, the psychologist, parents who are volunteering," said one parent. "Kids realize they are important here."

Parents in the Fitzgerald Public Schools, Warren, Mich., receive tips from their school on how to discipline "creatively" at home. The suggestions, prepared by Title I resource teacher Robert Grimm, include:

- **Rules:** Set rules and explain them. Don't use rules unless you plan to be consistent in enforcing them.

- **Approval:** Give attention to good behavior. A little praise goes a long way. Remember, it is important to children what you think of them. How children conduct themselves depends on what they think of themselves.

- **Ignoring:** Try not to give too much attention to bad behavior, unless it is serious. Some children continue to misbehave because they enjoy the attention they receive from parents who are constantly correcting them.

- **Discipline:** If rules have been explained thoroughly, there is no need to continue to lecture and warn. Punishment for misbehavior that is considered serious does not have to be severe, but it should be quick, reasonable and related to the misbehavior. Tell your child it is his/her behavior that you disapprove of, not him/her.

- **Participation:** Children need to learn to interact with adults. The gap between parents and children widens when they spend little time with each other. All kinds of activities and projects that are fun can be developed to help establish harmony. When children and parents are having fun together, the children respond positively and few serious discipline problems arise.

Direct parent involvement in discipline problems is the approach used by Blair High School Principal Charles Parcell in Pasadena, Calif. Parents of unruly students are requested to come to the school and help supervise the students. They attend classes with their children and watch them in the halls and on the school grounds. Parents who are called for this supervision duty spend from a few hours to a whole day at the school, depending on the seriousness of their child's violation. Only a few parents have refused the request, according to Parcell, and those who have come "get tired. It's hard on them." The school has noticed an overwhelmingly positive effect on student behavior, and parents have gained a new perspective—recognizing through experience some of the problems that are faced by the schools. The idea was in answer to a goal of Supt. Ramon Cortines to devise alternatives to suspensions.

Students at the Lincoln Elementary School in Robbinsdale, Minn., must attend a "rules class" if they disobey school rules more than once. (The rules are distributed and discussed thoroughly with the students.) During the rules class, students write a brief letter to their parents informing them that they had to attend the class and what rule(s) they have not followed. These letters are then mailed home. Also, an explanation of the rules and the discipline procedures are sent to every home.

## AND THEN, THERE'S THE MEDIA

Then, perhaps, there is the biggest problem of all to many principals: communicating with the media.

It wasn't too long ago that reporters were a rarity at the building level; except maybe during American Education Week. But today, any school district with a good public relations program encourages reporters to go out into the schools, where the good news lies, ready to be uncovered and reported.

But that's another worry for the harried principal, especially the principal without any training on how to deal with the media. Thus, unfortunately, the meeting of the reporter and the principal can be a communication disaster unless the principal is prepared, proud of his or her school, and willing to proclaim its merits frankly and objectively.

Good publicity depends on an awareness of what makes news in the first place and on continuing efforts to get the information about it to the right channels. Negative news gets coverage—for sure! But it takes conscious planning to get the good news out or to turn the media contact that begins unfavorably into a positive one for your school.

## When They Contact You

Be accurate, be clear and be honest in all your dealings with reporters. A reluctance to answer questions that put the school in a bad light may be construed as concealment. Resist the urge to gloss over unpleasantness; deal forthrightly with issues. Fielding difficult questions and making complicated information comprehensible is easier if you are prepared. Here are some hints:

- Anticipate the information needed. Prepare a fact sheet.
- Anticipate especially the negative points likely to be raised and have a response ready.
- Make lemonade of the lemons by confronting issues directly. Acknowledge the problem; outline a course of action to correct it; invite questions. You can earn a fair hearing and an unbiased presentation by your willingness to be open with the news media.

## When You Contact Them

You are the best judge of what is appropriate or important to publicize about your school. You will want to strike a balance between pestering the news media about mundane things and ignoring the value of important news. Individual schools often think in terms of the human interest story associated with particular school events.

These are particularly appropriate for community newspapers, whose readers are likely to be parents of your students. But the public is also interested in curriculum and special programs (how and what the schools are teaching) and in the cost of education. If you've got a good instructional program that saves money, you've got a story.

## Who Gets the Word Out

Appoint a media coordinator. He or she will soon become knowledgeable about where to send news releases and how to get news on the radio. Don't discourage any staff members from drumming up their own publicity for special projects. Sometimes when the person directly involved with the story—the faculty advisor or the program director—makes the contact, his or her enthusiasm awakens immediate interest and gains coverage when someone farther removed from the event cannot.

Consider whether parents might know (or be) someone who can get your story to the right person for exposure. Explore, develop and exploit your local resources. And, by all means, send a copy of your announcements to the school district's public relations office, or to the superintendent.

## Preparing a News Release

As a common means of disseminating information, the news release is just as suitable to the individual school as to the region or the district. Some general principles apply to all news releases:

- Make them easy to reproduce, easy to edit, easy to verify.

- A preprinted masthead saves you time and gives a professional appearance.

- Type the release double- or triple-spaced on one side only of 8" × 11" paper.

- Restrict copy to a single page, if possible.

- Mention opportunities for photographs in the release or include good quality black and white glossy photos, 5" × 7" or larger. Identification should be on a separate sheet of paper pasted to the back, not written directly on the photograph.

- Allow 10 days to two weeks lead time but be wary of releasing material too far in advance.
- Hand deliver, if possible, but if sent through the mail, direct them to a specific person whom you have identified in advance as the best contact.

NAME OF SCHOOL DATE

ADDRESS OF SCHOOL

CONTACT PERSON AND TITLE

PHONE NUMBER

COPY: Begins one-third down the page.

LEAD: First paragraph should include who, what, where, when, why and how.

BODY: Includes further details. Plan to get your most important facts in the first few lines, with information in decreasing order of importance to the end. If space is tight, stories are cut from the bottom up.

Give **facts.** No adjectives; no opinions.

Show the end # # #
Or "More"

# MORE IDEAS THAT WORK

## Happygrams

Happygrams are notes imprinted with a smiling face that teachers send home commenting about something good a pupil has done.

Traditionally, notes sent home from school mean something bad has happened. But teachers throughout the country are learning that it's nice to catch a youngster doing something good once in a while and send a congratulatory note home about it.

Parental response is overwhelmingly positive. There is also considerable motivation on the part of students to do something worthy of a happygram.

Variations include:

- One principal started a special Happygram program to improve students' behavior on school buses. Well-behaved students receive mimeographed notes signed by the bus driver and a badge which says "My Bus Driver Loves Me."
- At McCaskey High School in Lancaster, Pa., leftover art paper is turned into stationery printed with "McCaskey Cares" and envelopes say "Good News from McCaskey." Teachers use it to send good news to parents. The office pays for postage.
- At the Lorton Elementary School, Fairfax County, Va., teachers send home "Liongrams," imprinted with Leo the Lion, the school mascot. The notes have space for parental comments, and the parents sign them and return them to the teachers.
- Other schools develop pupil recognition certificates, signed by the teacher and principal and sent home with the student when he or she excells in school.
- Some principals clip newspaper articles, including those in the school newspaper, and send them to parents along with a personal note of congratulation.

## And Use the Phone

The Bellingham (Wash.) School District has instituted a "Phone-a-Parent" campaign, a districtwide program to place "good news" calls to parents each day. The plan has the full cooperation from the teachers association and building principals. Both teachers and principals make the calls.

The school district installed extra telephones in the schools so the regular telephones wouldn't be tied up, and it developed guidelines for making the calls. Besides being told some good news, parents are asked if the call is being made at a convenient time, and they are invited to visit the school. Also, a log is kept of all calls.

Says James Roberts, Bellingham superintendent: "Parents were shocked to find out that the call from the school wasn't bad news. After the initial surprise, they were delighted. The students were proud, and the parents developed more positive feelings toward the schools."

But, he warns, imposing an administrative decree on teachers and principals won't make the project work. It must be a cooperative effort. And teachers should be given some time, like preparation time, and some privacy to make the calls, Roberts says.

In San Jose, Calif., Principal Bonnie J. Thompson, of the John Muir Junior High School, began an "accentuate the positive" telephone campaign, where she calls at least three different parents a day just to chat about their children and the school.

## Making It Easy for Them to Call You

Some schools reverse the process and make it possible for parents to call the school and get recorded information at any hour of the day or night.

At Roosevelt High School in San Antonio, Tex., it's called "Dial a Message." It's a two-minute recorded message about what is happening in the school.

At Fisher Junior High School in Ewing Township, N.J., the caller has a chance, at the end of the recorded message, to ask questions or check out rumors. General questions are answered on a new tape the following week and specific questions are answered personally.

At Miffin Junior High School in Columbus, Ohio, there is a nightly recorded "Homework Lesson Hotline" with details on each class's assignments. The service was requested by parents.

## Student Community Service

Another sure-fire PR plus is involving students in community service projects.

Students of the Sun View Elementary School, Ocean View, Calif., held a Community Health Fair at the school, where, through the cooperation of school district nurses and community health organizations, a wide range of medical tests were made available to the public.

During the fair, the sixth graders put on a puppet show on good health habits, still another facet to overwhelming community acceptance.

At the McCluer High School in the Ferguson-Florissant (Mo.) School District, seniors, instead of making the traditional class gift to their school, pledged a gift of service to their community. They went out and helped needy families, provided transportation for senior citizens, and did house and yard work in the community.

At the Elkins Park (Pa.) Junior High School, eighth and ninth graders in child care classes run a nursery school four mornings a week for 3 to 5 year olds from 8:15 to noon. The program involves instruction, games, art and snacks.

Students at the Monrovia (Calif.) High School and Los Angeles County Regional Occupational Program publish an eight-page weekly community newspaper, with 10,000 copies distributed free by student volunteers to homes and businesses in the community.

The students began their project four months after the community lost its regular paper. Once again, the community reaction was extremely positive.

In the David Douglas School District No. 40, Portland, Ore., the following community services were provided:

- Health Service students worked in the local hospital, convalescent homes and public health department. They ran two blood bank drives.

- Child Service students operated a community nursery school and worked as volunteers in public and private schools.

- Horticulture students raised plants and sold them, worked on grounds improvement projects and did yard work for senior citizens without charge.

- Food Service students operated a restaurant at the high school and invited district residents to eat there.

- Construction students built two homes; they invited the public to watch the construction and visit the completed homes.

## Classroom Speakers

Another way to get members of the community into schools is to invite them in as classroom speakers.

At the Monroe Township School #2, Cranbury, N.J., Operation Gold Rush tapped the talents and skills of community persons with a variety of occupations and hobbies to come in and talk with the students.

The school mailed a brochure to community residents, with a tear-off response, asking them to volunteer to speak, and the response was so large the project, originally intended for just one school, was expanded to other schools in the district.

A resource coordinator kept a central file of all the speakers, and teachers, in planning their lessons, contacted the coordinator, who, in turn, contacted the speakers.

In Baltimore County, Md., the State Attorney and the county schools worked together to develop a program in which a county prosecutor was assigned to speak in every school on law related topics and arranged and conducted courtroom tours.

Local attorneys arranged mock trials in which the lawyers played the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys and judges and the students played the roles of defendants, witnesses and juries.

In Washington Township (N.J.) High School, local police help teach driver training, creating a positive, two-way communication between the police officers and the students that had not existed before the project began.

## Home Visits

When parents won't or can't come to the school, the school can go to the parents.

Invariably, in school districts throughout the country, when teachers visit the home to help parents help their children, several things happen:

- Parents are impressed. They get more involved, especially in coming to future parent/teacher conferences. They see teachers in a new, more positive light.
- The teacher gets a far better understanding of the pupil and his or her parents and home life, helping the teacher better serve the child.
- The lower achieving student's performance in class usually improves.

Again, however, a project like this must be a voluntary, cooperative effort involving the principal, the teacher and the parent. Mandates won't work.

Visits to homes are particularly effective for families new to the community.

A good new-family orientation program should be somewhat like the one set up by the Norris Elementary School in Omaha, Neb. As part of the program:

- A guidance counselor or parent volunteer visits new families that move into the area during the summer and throughout the year.
- The principal visits new families during the summer months.
- New students are introduced to other neighborhood children and given a tour of the school.
- Printed information about the school is provided for new families.
- A new-family orientation meeting is scheduled at the school at the beginning of the school year.
- New families receive special invitations from the principal to attend various school events.

## School Meals

Many schools feel that the way to a community's heart is through its stomach. They use breakfasts and lunches to bring people into the school.

At the Greenbriar West Elementary School, Fairfax, Va., the project is called "Dime-a-Dip." Families are invited to come and bring a covered dish that will feed six persons. Food donations are coordinated so there will be a wide variety. The event is advertised in the school paper, the local paper and by memos to parents, with a tearoff return slip at the bottom of each notice.

On the night of the dinner, participants pay a dime for each dip of food they take, providing a family of four with a good meal for about $2.50.

It's a big event and requires much planning, an active PTA and a lot of parental volunteers, according to Asst. Principal Beverly A. Mattox, but it is extremely popular with the community and it fosters increased community participation in other school activities.

At the Carl Brablec High School, Roseville, Mich., a monthly continental breakfast is held for up to 40 parents at which Principal John McLeon and key staff members discuss school programs, progress and problems.

The session involves an open discussion period with the parents, a tour of the school, classroom observation and a critique by parents of the school's operations.

At Bacon Elementary School in Amsterdam, N.Y., fathers are invited to early morning breakfasts before they leave for work to discuss school matters and to ask questions.

At Troy High School in Fullerton, Calif., 10 parents visit each week for an all-morning meeting and school tour followed by lunch in the faculty cafeteria.

At Gus Garcia Middle School in San Antonio, Tex., parents and teachers have an annual covered dish supper.

At Windemere Elementary School in Akron, Ohio, students topped off their summer gardening project with a Mulligan Stew luncheon for community dignitaries and school administrators. The meal was prepared with foods grown and canned by the students from their own garden.

## Senior Citizens

Schools also will find a ready group of communicators in senior citizens. If senior citizens are treated well by a school, they will be among its most active boosters.

The most common service given senior citizens by schools is the "Golden Age Card," which admits them free to school district activities like plays, musical presentations and sporting events. But there are many more ways to cater to the senior citizen.

Vocational high school students in Des Moines, Iowa, make repairs in homes or apartments of the elderly who can't afford to pay repairmen, working in a cooperative venture with the Model Cities Senior Citizen Office.

At Newark (Del.) High School, students, through "Project 1920s," visit and interview people who lived in the 1920s, giving the students new insights into the elderly and the elderly new insights into today's generation of young people.

Grandparents Day is another event used by many schools.

At the Saratoga Springs (N.Y.) City Schools, students carry home special invitations to their own grandparents, neighbors who are grandparents and senior citizens.

Pictures of old school buildings, former graduating classes, athletic teams and other memorabilia of education are exhibited on the day. A visitors center is set up where grandparents and other senior citizens can chat with school staff informally. Children take visitors on school tours to let them observe classes and teachers hand out information sheets explaining classroom activities.

As a result, senior citizens, school staff and students are brought closer together and senior citizens gain a greater understanding and appreciation of classroom studies.

At the Edward U. Taylor Elementary School in Montgomery County, Md., grandparents are used as volunteers. They are taken to school once a week on a bus and they help make instructional materials, work with small groups of students on projects like sewing and woodcutting, and tutor slow learners on a one-to-one basis.

The principal of Colonial Elementary School in Pelham, N.Y., sends a special invitation to grandparents to visit the school and share their skills with the students. He also sends them a copy of the monthly school newsletter.

In Woodland (Calif.) High School, students gave extra performances of plays especially for senior citizens.

In the Willoughby-Eastlake School District in Willoughby, Ohio, cosmetology students give ladies a shampoo and set for only 25 cents.

In the Ferguson-Florissant School District in Missouri, the Golden Age Lunch Program offers lunch and companionship at the nearest elementary school for 65 cents to those over 65 or on limited income.

At Oak Park and River Forest High Schools in Cook County, Ill., senior citizens can enroll in regular classes that aren't full. Art and philosophy are the most popular choices for senior citizens.

Chapter 11.

# Small School Districts

Small school districts need PR, too.

And with the proper commitment, it can be done on a limited budget. And it definitely brings results.

Arnie Rubin, communications director for the Brighton Area Schools, Brighton, Mich., puts it this way:

> While eight out of every 10 bonding proposals were defeated across the state of Michigan, Brighton voters approved two new schools and a swimming pool in the largest turnout in school election history. We attribute the success of the bonding issues to the systematic, year-round, two-way communication efforts of the Brighton Schools.
>
> By telling people what we are up to at the school house, how we are doing it, and by reporting all results (failures as well as successes), we gained the credibility and support that many school districts of the 70s have been lacking. When the community believes you are doing the job, they will support you—everyone supports a winner. A positive psychological attitude snowballs into continuing successes.
>
> The most important aspect of the Brighton PR program centers around two basic concepts: The complete support of the board and superintendent; and the realization that an effective PR program does cost money. The credo that we can't afford **not** to go all out on our communication program pays off for the total school community.

Norman B. McGuire, superintendent of the Little Falls (Minn.) Community Schools, agrees. As a matter of fact, he says, public relations programs in small school districts may be even more important than in large school districts in which residents get school news through the newspapers, radio and television.

"All districts, regardless of size and available monies, must have organized public relations programs," McGuire says, "because there is a PR program in any school district, and if it is not organized it will be disorganized and that can be very degrading."

McGuire has the following suggestions to fellow superintendents in small school districts who want to start an organized public relations program:

- Gain support of the school board for an organized school-community relations program—it is not a luxury, but a necessity.
- Assign someone to full- or part-time responsibility (this may be superintendent; administrator; teacher or lay person).
- No school-community relations program is a one person job; instead it involves the entire school community—students, faculty, administrators, other staff and school board.
- Provide finances and materials to do job.
- Use a three-pronged approach:
  - ✓ Internal—within school—faculty and staff;
  - ✓ External—residents within school district perimeter;
  - ✓ External—outside of school district (recruiting).
- Set up program of "What To Do"—newsletters, media releases, publications, etc.
- Encourage staff to become school-community relations conscious—emphasize that they must "tell it like it is."
- Have an ongoing program—not a crisis to crisis approach, not just when you think you need help from your constituents, such as bond issues, levy referendums or budget hearings.
- Encourage staff members to be an active integral part of the community.

- Be certain school facilities are available for community use. An 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. school use is not the best use of a public building so far as constituents are concerned.
- Recruiting, correspondence and telephone answers are often the only contact people have with your district. Be certain the impression left is honest and favorable.
- Work closely with the media. You must get along with them. No choice!

## Chapter 12.

# Evaluating Your Efforts

How good is your public relations program?

That's a tough question to answer.

But if you cannot answer it, the public relations program, and most likely the school district itself, is in trouble.

You might begin by asking yourself, what is a good public relations program?

Larry Ascough, assistant superintendent for communications for the Dallas (Tex.) Independent School District, has that answer:

> Good school public relations is based on a well-planned, comprehensive program of two-way communication between the school system and its many publics. It's designed to keep those many publics, both internal and external, informed and involved . . . and hopefully, it will also provide the school system with their understanding and support. Good administrators know that communication and management are inseparable . . . not only do people need to be informed, but administrators have to listen if they want to make proper decisions. No organization or institution can be adequately administered without a hard hitting public relations effort.

But how can you tell if your program really is comprehensive, if you are getting your money's worth, if you are really communicating with the proper publics?

It's not easy. There's no single, foolproof measuring device. Different school districts need different kinds of PR programs. Such programs, like instructional programs, must be designed to meet specific needs.

Yet, there are certain basic elements that all PR efforts, regardless of the size or the complexity of the school district, should include. They are:

1. **Is your district truly committed to good PR?** Is there a board policy with accompanying administrative regulations? Do the superintendent and middle management promote good PR? Have adequate human and financial resources been provided?

2. **Do you have a measurable PR plan?** To be effective, your program has to be well planned and spelled out. Begin by assessing needs . . . involve others in the planning . . . base it on overall district goals . . . keep it student centered . . . specify desired results so that your efforts can be assessed.

3. **Are key publics involved?** You must start at home with the staff . . . the community will require priority setting, but community leaders, parents, and the news media are keys.

4. **Are your activities varied?** Newsletters and the news media may be fine for some audiences, but they certainly won't get the job done alone. There are many ways to reach your publics . . . decide which will serve you best. Also, make sure you do more than putting out the word . . . listening is part of it too.

5. **Does everyone understand and are they prepared to handle their PR roles?** In a school system, everyone is part of the PR team. They have to be made aware of that first. Staff development programs must also be provided to give employes at all levels the tools and skills to handle the assignment.

But how about the results? Even if your PR plan has the proper base for its operations, is it producing? This can be answered in a variety of ways. Some of them are:

- ✓ Opinion polls
- ✓ Publication surveys
- ✓ Degree of community involvement
- ✓ Election results
- ✓ Feedback from advisory groups

- ✓ Review of telephone calls and mail
- ✓ Reaction of the media
- ✓ Atmosphere of board meetings.

A good superintendent, board member, principal or PR person knows, instinctively, whether or not true communication is taking place, or if a school district or a school board or a school itself is just going through the motions.

If, deep down, you know something is wrong, then do something about it!

And the first thing you might do is answer the following questions, taken from NSPRA's Evaluation Instrument for Educational Public Relations Programs:

1. Does the district have a written, clear and concise policy statement regarding its public relations program?

2. Is the policy statement approved by the school board, published in its policy manual and reviewed annually?

3. Does the policy statement express the purposes of the public relations program and provide for the delegation of such authority as necessary to achieve the purposes to an appropriate administrator?

4. Is the policy statement included in the district personnel handbook so that all staff members are aware of the purposes of the public relations program?

5. Is the public relations program allocated sufficient human and financial resources to accomplish its goals?

6. Is the public relations program part of the management function and does the person directing these efforts have the necessary skills and training to do the job?

7. Is the public relations officer/director directly responsible to the superintendent?

8. Does the public relations unit or officer have the authority to initiate or suggest such research studies as are necessary to carry out the objectives of the program?

9. Does the program provide for effective means of internal communication?

10. Does the public relations unit utilize feedback continuously to modify its activities to meet the information needs of its audiences?

11. Does the public relations program conduct inservice training for other members of the school staff in the area of school/community relations?

12. Does the public relations program have procedures for identifying specific individuals and groups with whom continuous communication and relationships are necessary?

13. Are there procedures for determining what kinds of information should be supplied, with particular emphasis on relative importance and the degree of public interest?

14. Does the program use a variety of appropriate communication media channels to get the message across?

15. Does the program encourage, receive, analyze and utilize feedback on its activities?

16. Does the program encourage community involvement in the schools?

17. Is there provision for continuous and systematic evaluation?

Answers to the above will tell you almost conclusively if you have the proper climate, organization and implementation of a good, professional school public relations program.

Of course, the questions above are just a beginning. Each district must formulate its own detailed set of evaluation criteria for its individual programs.

They will not, however, tell you if you are succeeding. Only your publics can tell you that. But if you don't listen, you'll never know. And when you finally hear, it will be too late.

## Timetable for Yearly Evaluation

The following sample timetable for a yearly evaluation of the PR program is based on a typical school year calendar:

| | |
|---|---|
| July | • Modify and/or formulate goals and objectives of the PR program for the coming year (or other specific evaluation period). |
| August | • Plan communications activities with those publics identified through the program goals and objectives. |
| September-June | • Implement communications activities with those publics identified through the program goals and objectives. |
| September-June | • Design and direct evaluation information-gathering tasks as required. |
| June | • Assimilate evaluation data and prepare report along with recommendations to improve weak areas identified. |
| June | • Report evaluation findings to publics involved in study. |
| July | • Modify and/or formulate goals and objectives of the PR program for the coming year (or other specific evaluation period) in light of evaluation results. |
| August-June | • Repeat process. |

## Chapter 13.

# Conclusion

School public relations is more than a phrase, more than a project or a program, more than a budgeted activity. Far more.

It is a climate, a commitment, a mission, a passion, if you will, to restore public confidence in education.

Public relations is more than just words. It is action; planned, continuous action, day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year, to convince the public of this country through communication and quality education that the public schools are, indeed, the backbone of the nation, and, as such, they must be preserved.

The commitment to action must be an all-consuming one. It must start with the board of education, where the policy, the climate, the tone of the school district is set. It must emanate strongly from the superintendent and it must filter down through the ranks to the classroom aide and the school crossing guard.

It is a task for the entire school family, not just the public relations person or the board president or the superintendent of schools.

This book is a source book of ideas, a catalogue of tools, a dictionary of resources to be applied to the battle to restore public confidence in education today.

Its contents prove conclusively that the job can and is being done in schools and school districts throughout the country.

But a scatter-shot approach is not enough. A national effort is critically necessary if public education is to survive.

And the question, really, cannot be, will it survive? The question must be, how long will it take?

Will confidence be restored before it is too late? Before public education is ripped to shreds? Before it is irreparably withered from fiscal starvation? Before Hechinger's warning of a "stratified, classbound society ruled by a self-perpetuating power elite of economical and social privilege" becomes a reality?

Will it be restored before we come to the end of the road, as Hechinger says, of "one of the most fundamental American ideals?"

The answer is up to you.

# Appendix

# BOARD POLICY

## ABC Unified School District, Cerritos, Calif.

The board of education of the ABC Unified School District is aware that the schools belong to the people who created them by taxation and consent. The Board also believes that the schools will only be as strong or as successful as the intelligent and knowledgeable support of the people permit them to be.

The board recognizes that intelligent, informed support of the schools is possible only when the public has full knowledge, understanding and participation in the efforts, goals, problems and programs of the school district. It is aware of its responsibility to provide the public with information and opportunities leading to participation, directly or indirectly, in the establishment of programs and policies that are in the public interest.

Therefore, the school district shall strive to:

1. Assure that the publics within the district have full access to information concerning programs and policies and administrative regulations.
2. Determine the public's reaction to the policies and programs anticipated or now carried out in the District.
3. Create and maintain an atmosphere that welcomes public involvement in district affairs.
4. Recognize and encourage the development of attitudes that the schools belong to the community and cannot be separated from it.
5. Create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect for children and adults residing, studying or employed within the ABC Unified School District.

Legal Reference: Education Code
1071. Powers to Promotz the Advancement of Education

# JOB DESCRIPTION

## ABC Unified School District, Cerritos, Calif.

**Public Information Officer**

DEFINITION

Under general direction, to write, prepare, collect and disseminate information and news releases concerning the district to various media of communication; to design, lay out, and edit material for district publications; to meet with community groups, staff organizations, parents and business groups as the district information representative; and to do related work as assigned.

TYPICAL TASKS

Attends meetings, reviews publications and reports, and confers with individuals and groups to obtain information; writes articles and news releases covering district activities; writes, designs, lays out and edits brochures, newsletters and other district publications; establishes and maintains cooperative working relationships with the press and representatives of all news media, attends meetings of the board of education and other meetings as requested with an eye to their news value; assists with district elections; works closely with all staff and community groups to maintain and improve communications; does related photographic work as necessary; maintains related records and files.

QUALIFICATIONS

Demonstrated experience in public relations, journalism, or a related field involving writing and editing for publications or for verbal media of communication.

KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITIES

Knowledge of public information channels and methods of distributing news; knowledge of public relations principles and practices; knowledge of correct English usage, spelling, grammar and punctuation; knowledge of, and ability to use, appropriate photographic methods, techniques, and equipment in setting up and taking pictures for publications; ability to write articles which are adapted to the needs and interest of diverse groups; ability to digest and abstract articles and to interpret statistical charts, graphs, and tables; ability to organize, edit and lay out printed material; ability to write and speak effectively; ability to establish and maintain cooperative working relations with others.

LICENSES

Valid California motor vehicle operator's license.

## BOARD POLICY

### Phoenix (Ariz.) Union High School System

We, the members of the Board of Education of the Phoenix Union High School System, District #210 of Maricopa County, Arizona, in our effort to attain excellence in the education of students for a free and responsible society, make the following affirmations on communications, based on the beliefs (a) that the public schools belong to the people who create them by consent and support them by taxation; (b) that the schools are only as strong as the informed and knowledgeable support of the staff and citizenry; and (c) that this support must be based on knowledge of, understanding about, and participation in the aims and efforts of the public schools.

We, therefore, affirm as the policy and goals of the Phoenix Union High School System, our commitment (1) to keep the staffs and citizens of the System regularly and accurately informed, through appropriate means of communication, on policies, programs, problems, and planning of the school system; (2) to solicit the advice and counsel of staffs, students, parents, and others on basic issues through appropriate channels of feedback and advisory councils; (3) to charge the administrative, instructional, and operational staffs of the system, as well as ourselves, with the duty to carry out this policy as an integral part of regular activities and responsibilities; and (4) to cooperate in every reasonable way with the news media, as the primary purveyors of public information, recognizing their right to all the facts and their responsibility to publish them in full and in timely manner. It is further affirmed that this policy be reviewed annually and formally by the board of education.

# JOB DESCRIPTION

## Phoenix Union High School System

### Administrative Assistant for Public Information

GENERAL STATEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Plans and directs an internal and external information and communications program for the District.

**Major Duties**

1. Act as liaison between the school system and newspaper, radio and television media and with such community agencies as the PTA, American Legion, American Assn. of University Women, Junior League, Dads' Clubs, service clubs, etc.
2. Maintain a speakers bureau, tape library; formulate and distribute catalogue for same.
3. Protect and edit such district-wide publications as the parent newsletter, staff newsletter, superintendent's annual report, special reports, and such other publications as are needed to effectively carry out the general responsibilities.
4. Arrange for and coordinate all appearances of school personnel on radio and TV.
5. Prepare and issue, under the direction of the Superintendent, press releases for all local media.
6. Visit school campuses and other district facilities regularly to get first-hand knowledge of what is going on and to talk with teachers, administrators, and other staff members to discover newsworthy items.
7. Plan and coordinate visits to schools by dignitaries from outside the system when they request such service and visits to business and industry by System employees.
8. Prepare publicity and informational materials needed for bond issues, levy, board elections, and budget preparation.
9. Develop creative devices for improving communication with the community and the staff.
10. Conduct in-service sessions with administrative, teaching, and classified staff on techniques in and importance of improving school-community relations.
11. Establish, with assistance of the research division, and put into practice methods of assessing community attitude toward education generally and the System in particular.
12. Serve as staff liaison with consultant to publications (yearbook, newspaper) personnel in the system.
13. Develop teacher recruitment materials, employee handbooks, and the like in conjunction with the personnel division.
14. Develop audiovisual materials for board and staff members to use in presentations to the community.

# BOARD POLICY

## The East Baton Rouge (La.) Parish School System

When a school board accepts the responsibility for providing the best possible educational opportunities for young people, it also commits *itself to an operation which guarantees* a system of open communication with its citizenry.

It is, therefore, the belief of the members of the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board that the obligation it accepts in the education of students for a free and responsible society is balanced by a further obligation to keep the society informed about public education. This obligation is based on the beliefs: (a) that the public schools belong to the people who create them by consent and support them by taxation; (b) that the schools can only be as strong as the informed and knowledgeable support of the citizenry and the school staff; and (c) that this support must be based on the knowledge of, understanding about, and participation in the aims and efforts of the public schools.

We, therefore, affirm as the policy and goals of the East Baton Rouge Parish School System, our commitment:

1. to keep the staffs and citizens of the System regularly and accurately informed through appropriate means of communication, on the planning, policies, programs and problems of the school system;
2. to solicit the advice and counsel of staffs, students, parents, and citizens on basic issues through appropriate channels of feedback and advisory councils;
3. to charge the administrative, instructional, and operational staffs of the system, as well as ourselves, with the duty to carry out this policy as an integral part of regular activities and responsibilities;
4. to cooperate in every reasonable way with the news media, as the primary purveyors of public information, recognizing their right to all the facts and their responsibility to publish these facts in full;
5. to develop, implement, and maintain an organized and continuing program of improved communication between the central office and its internal (all employees) and external (students, parents, citizens) publics.

## JOB DESCRIPTION

### East Baton Rouge (La.) Parish Schools

**Title:** Director of Communications & Community Relations

**Reports to:** Superintendent

**General Responsibility:**

Maintaining the major communications operations of the school system by assisting the Superintendent with the organization and administration of all internal and external communications.

**Examples of Duties:**

1. Communicates official School Board policy to public and employees and seeks to correct misunderstandings.
2. Assists staff members in expediting inter-, intra- or extra-district communications.
3. Directs the operations of the duplication room and the graphic arts department.
4. Supervises the preparation of bulletins, pamphlets, newsletters and other publications on activities and services of the school system.
5. Initiates and maintains a data collection system designed to assess community desires, attitudes, and knowledge about the educational process.
6. Compiles and reports data gathered through various forms of research techniques.
7. Acts as liaison between the school system and representatives of the media.

**Recommended Qualifications:**

Graduation from an accredited college or university with a Master's Degree in educational administration or related field.

Should possess administrative and leadership potential; strong writing and speaking capabilities; ability to take direction and work well with all levels of school personnel and community leaders. A basic knowledge of the philosophies of education is vital. The ability to identify information which is of general interest to the public, as well as beneficial to the school district, is essential.

## Orange County (Orlando) Public Schools, Florida

The School Board approves the following community relations objectives as a guide to policy development and the monitoring of their consequences.

The School Board requests the Superintendent to present a report periodically, but at least annually, concerning the extent of attainment of the community relations objectives with recommendations for any desired improvements.

To assist the Superintendent in preparing his report, the School Board offers guiding questions for each of the adopted objectives.

**Objective #1:** Production and distribution of school-sponsored publications within the school system and the community (See policies 1111 through 1111.2)

**Objective #2:** Cultivation of open, friendly, effective relations with the press, radio and TV (See policies 1112 through 1112.2)

**Objective #3:** Utilization of School Board meetings, School Board members, employes and students to enhance school-community relations (See policies 1120 through 1160)

**Objective #4:** Utilization of talents and abilities of members of the community in behalf of students and school operations (See policies 1200 through 1251)

**Objective #5:** Utilization of the talents and abilities of students, members of the school staff and School Board, in behalf of the community (See policies 1300 through 1325)

**Objective #6:** Community use of school plant and facilities (See policies 1330 and 1340)

**Objective #7:** Productive relations with the police and other branches of local government (See policies 1400 through 1414)

**Objective #8:** Cultivation of beneficial relations with county, state and federal levels of government (See policies 1420 through 1440)

**Objective #9:** Maintenance of productive relations with associations interested in education (See policies 1500 through 1540)

**Objective #10:** Cooperative relations with special purpose schools, colleges and school districts (See policies 1600 through 1650)

The School Board will make a periodic, but at least annual estimate, based upon the report of the Superintendent, of the extent of attainment of the community relations objectives for the preceding school year and record its ratings.

# JOB DESCRIPTION

## Orange County Public Schools

The Public Information Officer position with the Orange County Public Schools has a variety of responsibilities in serving the county district. Public Information Officer reports directly to the Superintendent.

The Public Information Officer is responsible for all public relations work of the district to include working with the Legislative Delegation, the community, the employees, the students, the parents, and the media. The office serves as the information hub of the district, with a variety of publications designed to reach many publics, as well as answering their needs through special publications, meetings, personal contacts, community involvement, and committee work.

The Public Information Office consists of two fulltime staffers and a shared secretary in conjunction with a Word Processing System for typing needs. Other services are available through other departments in the school district, such as an artist, two photographers, a print shop, copy preparation and layout, and a sign shop.

The budget of the Public Information Office is in excess of $108,000 which includes salaries, travel, equipment and supplies, and services purchased outside the school district. The Public Information Office is responsible for the broadcast of all School Board meetings on public television which makes up a large part of those services.

The Orange County Public Schools serve over 85,000 K-12 students as well as an adult and vocational enrollment of nearly 80,000. The school district is a county system serving urban, suburban, and rural areas. There are 105 schools which include four special education centers and four adult-vocational schools.

# JOB DESCRIPTION

## Westside Community Schools, District 66, Omaha, Nebraska

## Communications and School Community Relations ......7100

The board of education recognizes that the schools exist as an integral part of the community and cannot be separated from it. The board further believes that the success of the schools' program will depend largely upon the effectiveness of parents, students and staff working toward common goals. A continuous program of two way communication is essential.

### STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY

Employes of the Westside Community Schools are urged to participate in community activities as a means of keeping current on what is vital to the interests of the District and as a means of contributing time, and resources to make the neighborhood, city, state, nation, and world a better place to live.

### NEWS POLICY

The Board of Education recognizes that the schools belong to the people, and that the community should be kept informed about what is happening in the schools. Therefore, the news policy is based upon honesty, openness and fairness, and recognizes that what schools do is news. All staff members are urged to fully cooperate with members of the press in presenting their school programs through the media of the press.

Information of strictly a personal nature shall not be released without the consent of the individual.

### NOTIFICATION AND ATTENDANCE OF SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

The press and community will be given advanced notice of the time, place, and business matters to be acted upon at all school board meetings.

The public is invited and urged to attend all School Board Meetings.

### COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS

The board supports the adoption of programs which will aid the district in establishing effective communications both internally with staff and externally with the community, state, and nation.

### THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

The board recognizes the fact that the schools are built and improved through shared ideas. Since the district benefits from ideas shared with the system from across the nation, the system is therefore committed to, in turn, share with other school systems its ideas, on a local, state, and national level.

# BOARD POLICY

## Westside Community Schools, District 66, Omaha, Neb.

**Position:** Director of Communications

**To Whom Responsible:** Superintentdent

**For Whom Responsible:** Communications Department, administrators and staff members as superintendent's assignments designate

**Main Function:** To direct internal and external school-community relations programs for the school system

**Responsibilities:**

*Administration*

- To administer district wide functions as designated by the superintendent
- To develop and direct a planned, systematic program of communications
- To direct the district's communications program on a local, state and national basis, with major emphasis on communications within the district, communications between the student's school and home, and communications between the district and the community
- To serve as a communications liaison between the press and the superintendent and staff members
- To be knowledgeable of all major happenings within the district as a basis for accurate reporting and communicating
- To arrange for press coverage at all major functions of the district
- To organize and plan regular meetings for communication advisory group, made up of community leaders
- To maintain a working relationship with community leaders and community organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce
- To serve as an advisor to the superintendent and as a member of the superintendent's administrative council
- To represent the school system in community, state and national functions, as requested by the superintendent

*Personnel*

- To work with administrators, staff members and community volunteers in planning and developing public relations programs and strategies for both one way and two way communications
- To plan, develop and maintain channels for communication with all staff

*Curriculum*

- To be well informed about the school programs, and activities as a basis for communication needs
- To serve as a communications consultant for various district curriculum committees
- To develop communication plans for curriculum adoptions

*Staff Development*

- To work with the director of staff development in developing and leading communication workshops for staff members, as needed and requested
- To provide staff development programs for the communications staff

*Communications*

- To manage the operation of the communication department with direct responsibility for department personnel, budget development, materials and equipment
- To manage the development and production of district publications for staff and community
- To direct the functions of the printing office for administrative, curriculum, and communication purposes
- To develop and maintain an effective working relationship with the news media
- To prepare news releases, organize news conferences and prepare informational programs
- To assist any staff member or group of employees to tell a story of what's happening educationally, by news story, slide presentation, speech, article, media announcement
- To be a consultant in organizing and conducting effective meetings and conferences

*Finance*

- To annually submit proposed budgetary items for the communications department to the superintendent
- To be accountable for all approved budgetary expenditures allocated to the communications department

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